Serving them right? How libraries can enhance the learning experience of international students: a case study from the University of Exeter

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This article covers the steps I've taken to better support international students at the University of Exeter library since taking on the role of international officer.

BACKGROUND

Last year, the University of Exeter took part in the international Student Barometer: a satisfaction survey completed by international students and run every term. It covers all aspects of the student experience and the university used it to analyse service delivery with a view to attracting higher numbers of international students. (The university has aims in its corporate plan of increasing international recruitment.) Results for the library's service were disappointing: although international students saw library services as very important, they were not very satisfied with them. Satisfaction levels were also significantly lower than other universities from the peer group. The questionnaire itself was very generalised: the relevant question simply asked how satisfied they were with the library facilities; there was no

breakdown of which aspects of library facilities. Extra comments gave some clue to the particular problems perceived: these tended to focus around access to textbooks, which is governed by devolved funding at Exeter, and therefore the responsibility of the academic departments. However, as part of a response to these results, at the start of the summer I was asked to take on the role of library international officer and to develop new services that enhance the library experience for international students. This role complements my post as subject librarian: I look after several departments, including the school of business and economics, who attract a large international student population each year.

LOCAL AND PROFESSIONAL RESEARCH

I was conscious that new services needed to be in place by the start of the new academic year, so a rapid response was needed to meet this deadline. I started by meeting the university's international student support officer to gain some insight into her work and to discuss the best sort of services to put in place. She gave me many initial pointers on specific issues that could arise, for example: the use of roman numerals is particularly confusing to other nationalities. At the same time, I was also able to share issues of unrealistic expectations that we meet amongst library users. For example, I observed on a visit to a Russian university that many students are lent a full complement of textbooks by the library at the start of the academic year. There is no competition for texts, so our system of expecting students to purchase key texts and only providing a few copies in the library can come as a shock and a perceived poor service. As Jackson notes[1], students from other countries might be experiencing stress simply trying to settle in and adapt to a new culture, so managing expectations before arrival could help with the adjustment process. The support officer also introduced me to several other important contacts within the international office and made me aware of other services across campus with whom it would be advisable to liaise.

I next searched the professional literature to discover who else was working in this area and what sort of services were delivered. Singer's article[2] was particularly informative as she had already surveyed lis-link quite recently and compiled a list of services. Her article also gives some good background facts on the current numbers of international students in universities in the UK. Whilst researching recent developments, I noted that the drive towards a customer focus in the higher

education sector is also reflected in the market for international students: a Higher Education Policy Institute survey recently showed that a third of respondents believed that universities in the UK did not offer good value for money[3]. In order to attract more students here, we need to be offering higher levels of services that give added value and enhance the learning experience of all. Overall numbers of international students entering higher education this term have remained static, though numbers of students from China and Nigeria have dropped (8% and 34% respectively), whilst numbers from new EU countries have risen (50% rise in Polish students)[4].The recent news that continental universities are now offering degree programmes taught in English for a fraction of the fees charged in the UK[5] also means that British universities will have to find new ways of attracting and retaining international students, offering more and better services to justify the difference in fees.

I contacted registry for a list of countries of origin for our own international students with a view to examining if there were any particularly large groups (and therefore cultural issues). The spread was vast, with over 84 different countries represented, though the two largest groups came from China and the United States – these students made up a third of the total. The other two thirds were quite thinly spread across the remaining 82 countries.

A web survey also seemed logical as many perspective students will browse through institutional websites before application. However, I found that a web presence for international student library services was minimal – many libraries simply gave the name of a support officer, though some had a single page of help and orientation information. In view of the need to attract new students to the institution, I felt strongly that the support structures should be clearly visible on the website in order to 'sell' the facilities and also to enhance the student experience even before arrival.

SCHEDULE OF WORK

The next step was to call together a working group of interested colleagues, some of whom had been international students in other countries in the past. Together we planned a schedule of work to put in place services for the new academic year including:

- a new set of web pages

- a jargon list of library terms
- an introductory leaflet to complement the existing welcome leaflet distributed to all new students
- contributing to internal newsletters to advertise the support available
- extra induction teaching sessions, focusing on library basics and cultural differences in library practices
- drop-in sessions run at several points throughout the term so students could bring specific issues for one-to-one help
- obtaining books for students, mainly guides on living/studying in the UK and other books using basic English for those learning the language.

We prioritised these tasks and completed the leaflet first as this was subject to a design and print deadline. The web pages were the next priority as we recognised that students might want information pre-arrival. Most importantly, I wanted the pages to be visible, rather than buried deep within the library website, so I requested a menu link from the homepage for 'International Student Services'. I noticed from my web survey that many libraries do not have a similar link on the homepage, although there are many who have links for services for disabled users (for example). We decided to use a question and answer format on the pages rather than straight factual lists, so we hoped they would be more intuitive. A link was added to the Alta Vista Babel Fish translation programme[6], so students can obtain an automatic translation of the pages into eight different languages. The web pages are available at:

http://www.exeter.ac.uk/library/international/

We also incorporated a help page on roman numerals and a new jargon list of library terms. We were aware of a few lists produced by UK universities, but Oxford Brookes' list seemed the most comprehensive[7]. Using the Oxford Brookes list for inspiration, we created an initial list of terms that needed definition, then adding local terms and any others that we thought of. The list is now quite lengthy, but we are still adding new terms when required.

An introductory leaflet for international students was compiled in the house style of general information guides. It covers the basic information a new student would need, including how to join the library, finding and borrowing books, passwords, and asking for help. I liaised with the international office staff to ensure that all new students received one of the leaflets in their university welcome packs.

Our team offered extra library induction sessions for international students, covering the basic information that was given in the aforementioned leaflet. These proved surprisingly popular, leading us to run extra sessions throughout 'Welcome Week' before the start of term. We also decided to offer drop-in sessions later in the term for students to bring their own issues to, though these have proved less popular. The introductory sessions, combined with the invitation to ask staff if problems arise seem to be sufficient from the evidence so far.

It was also noted that a collection of books covering British culture and how to survive as a student in the UK would be useful, so we purchased a selection of titles. We plan to purchase more, including materials that will help those learning English. A visit to the nearest public library was arranged to see what sort of material they hold on this topic, so we could complement their holdings. It also seemed sensible to locate all these books together in a specific section, so they are easy to find. Whilst setting up the services for international students, it was clear that a wider issue of race equality also needed to be addressed within the service. The University of Exeter has its own race equality group, so I joined

as the library representative and hope to contribute to this issue at a higher level.

Staff training is always a crucial issue when new initiatives are undertaken. Awareness of cultural issues and the sensitivity to know when extra help is required are key. Cross-cultural awareness in communication has been highlighted within library literature: Zhang[8] highlights the need for librarians to understand the effect different cultures have on communication. As an initial introduction, the working group organised a staff training session, inviting along the university's equality and diversity officer as well as the international student support officer to talk about the issues involved with students from other countries. There was a clear message that the range of countries represented at the university is so vast that it is hard to make generalisations about cultural issues. However, all staff were asked to think about potential barriers the students faced as well as problems they had encountered themselves. Follow up sessions are planned and I hope to add to this by contributing to a new online training package covering equality and diversity issues. Finally, we purchased some book titles on cultural awareness and supporting international students to add to library stock as an additional training aid.

CONCLUSION

Setting up the services for international students has been –by necessity– an exercise in rapid response. It will be easier to reflect on the success of the services I have put in place after a full academic year has elapsed. However, results from the autumn term student barometer survey will be available in the new year and I hope the satisfaction levels will reflect the extra work that has been put in. The university has recently announced a partnership with INTO to recruit more international students, so additional challenges will be facing us next academic year with the arrival of 100 extra students, rising to 500 over the next few years. Existing services will need to be developed and extended, but I look forward to the new intake and the challenge it will provide.

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