Academic Support at Leeds Metropolitan Library

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Award winning Library Academic Support Team

Leeds Metropolitan's Library Academic Support Stream is made up of Academic Librarians and Information Services Librarians who provide academic support to the university's six faculties. The team use innovative methods of working together to engage students and enhance their experience. The team only formed a year ago so this is a good time to reflect on our success so far.

The library service at Leeds Met is continually developing and offers new challenges and opportunities for staff providing library academic support. Innovation has even become part of our new name – 'Libraries and Learning Innovation'. We still offer all the traditions types of library academic support, but there is an increasing emphasis on finding innovative ways of supporting students and publicising what we can offer.

This year the Library Academic Support Stream won a University Attitude Character and Talents Award for Future Focus.

Communication and sharing

We are based on two sites but it is important that we work as one team. We have changed the way we communicate by developing a wiki, which acts as a repository for learning objects, teaching resources and a place to share best practice. Through it we share and discuss ideas, information and materials for the three key areas on which we have been primarily concentrating - teaching and learning, research support and information literacy. Each area has a group within the stream, leading that area although all members of the stream can contribute to all three areas. All three groups use the wiki to share information and resources relating to the different interest groups, and this ensures we have a more holistic approach to these differing strands.

The wiki includes a resource bank, online training materials with comments on how they can be used, tips, links to other resources, planning proformas, evaluation forms, and examples of best practice. Use of this wiki has dramatically increased the sharing of information and ideas amongst team members and generated a wealth of new ideas.

As well as communication within the stream, we are always looking for opportunities to promote what we can offer to a wider audience and most recently have been involved in the first Library Festival, a week long

extravaganza of activity to promote the library. We hosted an information literacy session by Moira Bent, National Teaching Fellow from the Newcastle University, ran workshops for university staff and students and held drop in sessions promoting chosen databases of the week.

Interactive, multimedia information sources

We are updating our subject web pages with innovative and interactive content to make them more dynamic, including using Intute, a service which evaluates websites and keeps hyperlinks kept up to date, and provides RSS feed to alert users to new relevant websites. We have recorded videos to replace text information, and incorporated quizzes and tutorials.

We have created interactive online tutorials to embed into the curriculum to supplement face to face teaching and ensure all students have access to the information at point of need and can learn at their own pace. Members of the team have learned how to use the various software required including Flash and Captivate. They have also created database training materials using Informs to create tutorials where students can work through a live search on the database with the backup of tutorial help online along side it.

We have been working with academic staff to embed information literacy into the curriculum and encourage them to use the tutorials and materials we have created. We have been successful in asking staff to invite us to contribute to their modules on the VLE.

The team is also investigating Camtasia which allows incorporating video, quizzes, and other interactive media into subject web pages.

Information skills research

Building on the work of various information literacy initiatives over the previous academic year, members of the team have been successful in a bid for funding from the university's Teaching Quality Enhancement Fund, to research best practice in information literacy teaching and use this to enhance information skills teaching at the university.

The fund offers staff opportunities to run projects designed to enhance the quality of the student experience. We plan to liaise with colleagues at other institutions to find out what techniques they use to teach information skills. We will use this to inform our own practice and enable us to build on the strategies we already developed. The TQEF money will be used to fund colleagues' attendance at the LILAC conference in April 2009 and for visits to other institutions, primarily Cardiff University.

In addition to networking with colleagues we are reviewing the latest research on how information skills are currently being embedded into the curriculum. This is being carried out in conjunction with a student who is completing their MSc in Information Studies at Leeds Met. The literature review is providing

invaluable insights in to the current position of information skills teaching in higher education today. We are due to complete the project in May 2009 and plan to publicise our findings, through Leeds Met's in-house publication, The Assessment, Learning and Teaching Journal.

Information skills in your pocket

We have recently produced a publication called The Little Book of Information Skills, as an innovative way of presenting information and engaging students in this crucial area which is one of the top Assessment, Learning and Teaching Priorities within the university for next year. The Little Book is aimed at first year undergraduate students which also addresses another key priority of the university which is to enhancing the first year experience. The format is especially accessible and portable and contains hints and tips and a step by step approach to good practice in information skills based on SCONUL's Seven Pillars of Information Literacy. It follows the seven steps a fictional student takes to find information in the library. Her assignment is to do a presentation on global warming. The book gives examples of how our student conducts her research by following the seven steps.

Supporting research

Research is one of the 3 key strands of the work of our Academic Support Stream. The research group, jointly chaired by three stream members, was set up with the aim of finding ways to support the Leeds Met research community to inform and refresh the curriculum. At the outset we identified 6 key objectives, including improving the ways in which we communicate with our researchers, expanding the training we provide for new researchers, and looking at how we can innovate to provide new support or support researchers in different and non traditional ways. We also wanted to examine how we as librarians could contribute to the university's research output.

An initial brainstorming session was held involving all members of the stream to identify the key issues. The chairs of the group also undertook a review of the literature and looked at how other university libraries support their researchers. These reviews have started to identify best practice and we intend to follow up by contacting colleagues in other institutions to gain further insights. We have also audited our existing provision and designed a questionnaire which will be sent to all researchers to identify what they need from our services and how they think that we can improve.

Members of the stream delivered workshops to promote the library to research award supervisors during the university's Assessment Learning and Teaching day at the Staff Development Festival in September, and 2 stream members have had articles published in the university's Assessment Learning and Teaching Journal which encourages new researchers to write about their work.

Of course the work of the research group overlaps with the other 2 Academic Support Stream interests of teaching and learning and information literacy, and future initiatives will involve working closely together.

The Research Information Network report (2007) identifies the need for researchers and librarians to engage in dialogue to ensure the most effective use of library services and librarians' expertise. The aim of the Academic Support Stream research group is to maintain and improve this dialogue in our institution.

Flexible spaces

Library spaces at both sites have been reconfigures to enable flexible learning and teaching, transforming us 'from a traditional library to an innovative, flexible, student-centred library for the twenty-first century' (Everest and Morris, 2008). We now have teaching spaces in the library with different types of furniture for different kinds of working. There are comfortable seats with coffee tables, office chairs on casters, and tables of different sizes and shapes that are easy to move around and arrange in a variety of ways. As a result of this, our teaching can to be much more flexible. In a recent workshop on research skills, we organised the participants into teams thus introducing a competitive element to the session, which engaged the learners and created a lot of fun and rapport. Each team had a slightly different task to complete and was equipped with a wireless laptop. The emphasis of the workshop was on interactive learning, and the layout of the furniture facilitated this.

The ground floor of one of our libraries is now a huge group study area, and librarians sometimes use the space to hold meetings. It is an inviting and comfortable space, as well as being wireless enabled. One of the benefits of holding meetings in the open area is that other members of staff from different streams will often pass by and show interest in what we are doing. This informally enables the exchange of ideas and encourages cross stream communication.

The future

Next week the team will have its first away day. Part of the day will be taken up by looking at individual strengths and what they can contribute to the team and past will be doing some brainstorming and forward planning for the coming year, in line with the university's Vision and Character statement.

Something we will be investigating in the near future is the use of Elluminate as a web conferencing tool to further enhance cross-site communication amongst our team.

Communicating and working in partnerships with library staff within the Regional University Network will be another. The library at Leeds Met works in partnership with the 23 colleges of the Regional University Network to open up library services and add value to the students and staff experience in the

network. We hope to work with them to enhance information literacy provision in their institutions and learn from their practices.

References

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