

Meeting and greeting new students

The introduction of self-service, and new layouts in complex buildings, prompted the creation of a service to welcome new students at Leeds Met as they used the library for the first time. **Helen Finlay and Dilys Young** report.

At the beginning of the 2004/05 academic year Leeds Metropolitan University piloted a project to support new students as they began to use the library, by developing a 'meeting and greeting' service providing a first point of contact and a friendly face. The idea had been seen at other universities, most notably the University of Huddersfield.

The libraries at the Civic Quarter and Headingley campuses are large, complex buildings: one purpose-built over five floors (of which the ground floor comprises an impressive, double-height entrance area), the other a myriad of corridors and floors in a listed building. Attractive as these buildings are, feedback from students in recent years indicated that they find them difficult to use and would welcome further support in helping them find their way around when they first arrive at the university.

The new service was a strategic response to support student independence through self-service, which had been introduced the previous year, and which was going to provide new ways of supporting student activity during our extensive unstaffed opening hours. A number of key areas were identified as important in delivering this:

- helping students use the new self-service stations
- demonstrating self-service options at the catalogue, in particular helping students check their library account for fines, check borrowing records and see if their reservations had arrived
- helping students use the catalogue more effectively to find items and make reservations
- helping with any other information needs as a first point of contact.

We sought staff views on how the service could be implemented, and additional training on self-service and the catalogue was provided so that staff felt more confident in demonstrating these services to students. A new, more prominent staff badge ('Can I Help?') was designed, and 'meeting and greeting' staff wore it to identify themselves more effectively to students.

Although no formal feedback was sought we received some very positive comments from students who found this additional help useful and encouraging, particularly in the first few weeks of term. The service was particularly valued by mature students who had little prior experience of using large academic libraries and found them daunting.

Staff were asked for their views on the project and for suggestions for improvements. They felt that the service had definitely helped students, with one noting, 'the best bits were seeing the relief on "little-boy-lost" faces when we offered friendly help'. Many of the suggestions were about ensuring there were enough staff to undertake the role effectively, and there was debate about the use of badges versus other means of identification to ensure staff visibility.

Student survey

For the 2005/06 academic year we decided to formally adopt meeting and greeting for the start of each semester. The badge was redesigned by the library publicity team, using the same 'brand' as that advertising the self-service facilities. To help staff who might feel conspicuous, and to optimise the service they were able to give, a clipboard with basic information such as floor plans and a daily sheet of induction sessions being run by the Learning Advisers was provided. They also kept a log sheet

of the types of enquiries being made so we could see if there were other solutions which might help students find their way around – for example, better guiding and signage.

This time we asked students for their opinion via an online survey and publicity encouraging them to fill in customer comments forms. The questions focused on their experience as they visited the library during the first few weeks of term.

The response to the first one, 'Were you welcomed by a member of staff when you came into the library?', came as a surprise – only 43 per cent said they were. However, we realised that, given the numbers of people entering in the library at any one time, and our staffing levels, it would have been impossible for us to interact with every single person.

What was more important was that we were helping the people who appeared to need it the most. Almost half the students who said they didn't meet a member of staff said that they hadn't needed any help and a considerable number of them made spontaneous comments about the help they'd seen being given to others: 'They approach you if they see you struggling with something or looking a little lost!'

All respondents who were welcomed felt that staff were helpful or very helpful and there were many positive comments about the experience, including, 'This is my first time at an English university... I feel I am in a very friendly environment in both campus and library which makes my time here worthwhile and enjoyable. Thanks for your professionalism [sic] and amiability.'

These results (plus other feedback from our Charter Mark assessor, customer comments, the customer satisfaction survey from earlier in the year, mystery visitor



Photo: Galina Barskaya.

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reports and colleagues involved in supporting students with disabilities) provided a valuable insight into how it feels to walk into a university library for the first time. This information formed the basis for a series of staff forums in autumn 2005, used to evaluate further the meeting and greeting service, and to ask staff how effectively we welcome users and introduce them to our wide range of services available throughout their academic careers.

Once again staff were full of suggestions for improvements, focusing on areas such as publicity and guiding, the environment and using staff effectively. A report was presented to the senior management team, who endorsed the service and made suggestions on how it might work with other services for new students such as induction and helpdesk services.

Plans for the start of the 2006/07 academic year will refine the meeting and greeting service and our overall welcome to users. It will again focus on demonstrating self-service facilities – we have introduced RFID this summer and need to show the new system to both new and returning students. In addition, the new layout of the refurbished Headingley Library, and revisions to the zoning study space project at Civic Quarter, mean that we will be introducing tours of the buildings for the first time in many years.

The meeting and greeting service will continue to evolve – it enhances the student experience and in particular provides a much needed welcome to new students as they start at university, and use the library and its facilities for the first time. ✪

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