
A week in the life

'Enviably beads' at outreach centres

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Kim McGowan is the Edge Hill University Faculty of Education Outreach support coordinator. Her role is to ensure that students based at off-campus sites have equitable access to the Learning Services and Student Services support they need.

MONDAY

So keen to be in early to prepare for the first visit of a group of Shrewsbury students and trainee teachers that I inevitably find myself caught up in the A59 novelty vehicle convoy headed up by the steam-powered farm machine from Tess of the d'Urbervilles. At a junction the steam engine is ably replaced by a half timbered car whose driver slows almost to a halt each time a vehicle comes along in the other direction. 'They've got their own side' I call in an enabling manner but clearly haven't tapped into her preferred learning style.

Still arrive in time to whizz through emails before I prepare for our visitors. There are several password and off-campus access queries and an awful lot of spam (how do they know about my little problem?).

A colleague from the off-campus team joins me to greet the Shrewsbury visitors with coffee and then we jog them on a whistle stop tour taking in Careers and the finance team in Student Services and an opportunity to speed browse and borrow from the relevant areas of the Learning Resource Centre (the dean of faculty is meeting them at 12.30). I have to leave to drive to deliver an induction at Bury but my colleague joins the students again for lunch and it transpires that their time in the LRC is the high point of their day.

Arrive at Bury with time to meet a new associate tutor and to be briefly interviewed by a very encouraging external off-campus consultant who is reviewing Faculty of Education off-site provision. I appreciate this because I have first hand grasp of the 'non-traditional' student experience and know I can reflect many of their views and

needs. Also just time to briefly discuss some registration and access issues the April start foundation students are experiencing with the Bury based support tutor.

There are three new groups of April 2006 start foundation level students. They all work full-time, usually as classroom assistants, and are studying part-time for a degree in supporting teaching and learning. The admissions regulations for 2005 dictate that they must obtain new medical and criminal record bureaux clearance before they can complete registration. Clearance processes are inevitably lengthy and I've been liaising with my colleagues in admissions and academic registry for weeks to ensure that at least a percentage of the students have their registration number (and *ergo* access to LRC resources) before this induction visit.

A good proportion of the students are registered and I arrive with a list of numbers and library cards for those who are. Sadly, what I did not anticipate is that they would not have received their registration letters so none of them have passwords. The application to set student passwords is web-based and I can deal with the situation but it is time-consuming and the start of the session is disagreeably disrupted.

Consignments of Student Services, Learning Services and Students' Union information material are lined up to be collected or distributed. I deliver information including how to apply for financial support and who to go to for advice, counselling or inclusion and dyslexia support. I demonstrate how to access university WebMail, WebCT (the virtual learning environment), how to register for postal loans and how to access the library catalogue and electronic resources. The session is very intensive and I'm acutely sorry for the unregistered students who can't go home and practise. I emphasise over and over again that the information in the handouts is comprehensive and I'm only an email away if they want me to reinforce the processes once they're registered. But I just know how overwhelmed some of them are feeling. I answer several specific registration, funding and access queries (there is quite a lot of confusion between WebMail and WebCT) and before I leave I update the noticeboard (already liberally lathered with my photo and contact details).

TUESDAY

Meeting with colleagues from inclusive provision and financial support teams regarding facilitated

workshops for a collaborative provision conference in a few weeks time. Whilst I'm in the area I pop into the external relations and marketing offices for material (especially novelty pens, balloons and mini gonks) for a sixth form conference I'm presenting at soon. The Edge Hill logo has just changed so I can't use quite a bit of the branded stuff but AimHigher provide some perfect 18-year old-friendly gear.

Before anything else I set passwords for all the foundation students I'm inducting at Wirral this afternoon. It is a risk because I could be changing the password of someone who doesn't attend the session but on reflection the advantages outweigh the risks: I don't want a repeat of yesterday's disruption.

Today I decide to visit academic registry, the LRC and the IT team to follow up the Bury students' queries and issues with relevant colleagues. It's more diplomatic than email and, because it reduces the risk of ambiguity, probably saves time in the end. Then, off to the Wirral with a companion from the LRC off-campus team. It's grand to have company; she's an expert on Vista (virtual student access) and the postal loan service and it's important for the students to see the lovely face that goes with the name and the voice on the phone.

The induction is wonderful. As well as my off-campus team companion, a colleague from the Whiston outreach centre is shadowing the session in preparation for September inductions. Off-campus students vary enormously but many lack confidence in their IT skills; having roving helpers makes such a difference to their experience. Two students are very upset about the delay in their registration; they think it might mean they don't have a place. My partner is able to reassure them and telephone Admissions for an update whilst I continue with the induction. It's becoming apparent that delays are often due to applicants not realising how crucial supporting documentation such as exam certificates are to the registration process in higher education.

Setting the passwords in advance was the right decision. Before we leave we take photographs for library cards. It isn't actually necessary for an off-campus student to have a card unless they want to visit a campus or use the UK Libraries Plus scheme, but I see it as part and parcel of belonging to the university. All of them chose to mill alphabetically for a photo. It's an opportunity to link with and get to know the trainees individually. I take

the pictures in alphabetical order but I also write little identification notes next to their name in the register so that I can match the photo to the name and number back at base – 'enviable beads', 'pink striped shirt', 'earnest expression', 'man'.

Spend a few minutes updating the notice board and catch up with the co-ordinating tutor based at the site. The drive back to Edge Hill gives my colleague and me an opportunity to discuss support issues. Once I've downloaded the photos she will produce the library cards and post them out to the students with their Vista packs – brilliant solution!

WEDNESDAY

My emails are bringing out my grumpy old woman characteristics. Some queries contain acronyms I'm not even acquainted with. And I'm sure some of those enquiries come from people with made up names. I answer anyway.

Attend a 2006 student fees and funding update; crikey it's a bit complicated.

Off to deliver an information skills refresher near Manchester this afternoon. The students are anxious about having to use WebCT in their next and final year and my charming friend from the WebCT team is joining me so he can demonstrate the application and reassure them it won't involve rocket science. Actually I suppose it might. In any case, he's a big hit.

The group has two dominant and sometimes hostile members who assure me that they're all information retrieval experts. Bearing their assurances in mind I've prepared a worked example of a focused British Education Index search using the Thesaurus facility. It's soon clear that I might be looking at an instance of unconscious incompetence. They might mean they're good at retrieving information from Google. The most productive part of my session is when I start from where the learners are. I go around from one student to the next during the break responding to individual queries, side stepping the peer pressure of the ruling characters. We all learn a myriad of new things (including me and the imprudent agitators).

THURSDAY

Spend the early part of the day following up a plethora of issues arising from yesterday and earlier in the week. Email all the April start foundation students in their WebCT course because a

new password prompt box is triggering a spate of concerned correspondence.

I visit the Hutton Lancashire Constabulary Training Centre in the afternoon to deliver a box of books to add to the small onsite collection, and deliver an information workshop to a cohort studying for a foundation degree in education and training. Most are serving police officers. The fact that the group are predominantly male and are already delivering training to others themselves means that the dynamics of this session are quite different from those earlier in the week. The students are amazed at the miracle of getting quality, peer reviewed papers electronically. An informal, creative and productive gathering – gorgeous and great fun.

FRIDAY

Today I pay the price for a week of self indulgent gadding. Time to sort stuff and catch up with colleagues, sort posters to promote off-campus study skills support, collect more Vista leaflets, complete a half finished resources audit report, prepare for two imminent audits of additional outreach centres, book rooms on and off-campus for September inductions, take some photographs and start to put together the PowerPoint presentation for the sixth form conference, send out maps in anticipation of an outreach meeting to be held at the new Wirral site, introduce myself to the new Students' Union president, check up on the progress of the unregistered stragglers, arrange meetings with tutors and administration colleagues, think about the most effective way delivering crucial information to off-site students who receive all their tuition online; just the usual chores that generally spawn a dozen or so auxiliary jobs.

When I'm travelling a lot I like to listen to unabridged audio books from the Harris library. I drive home in peace, unimpeded by steam threshing machines or Morris Travellers, listening to *Never let me go* by Kazuo Ishiguro. Bliss. My preferred style is to learn by doing. This week has taught me that, like children's parties, there's no such thing as too much ground work or preparation for off-campus inductions, that I should trust my instincts where student information skills are concerned and shouldn't be swayed by the domineering and vocal minority, and I that even a grumpy old Greenham veteran can learn to love a police officer.