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# Charter Mark – to apply or not to apply?

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## INTRODUCTION

On 30 January 2008 Aston University Library staff gathered to celebrate our achievement of Charter Mark status. Jill Lambert, formerly head of public services and recently retired, returned to the library to join in the celebration. So what does Charter Mark status mean for the library? Firstly, it is the achievement of a government national standard in high-quality customer service, which is an important external validation of the effectiveness of the library in delivering quality customer service. Secondly, it represents a commitment to evaluate and improve the quality of customer service on an on-going basis for the benefit of all users of the library.

## WHY DID WE APPLY?

Like many other institutions, in July 2005 Aston library & information services successfully achieved Investors in People status. We had achieved recognition of the investment that we make in library staff, but we also wanted to validate what we have been doing to improve our services for customers. A belief in our customer services excellence and the high regard in which the library staff are held by university staff and students alike gave us the confidence to aim

for formal recognition. Now that students are fee-paying, they arrive at university with a much higher expectation about the quality of service they should receive and are far more articulate in expressing their demands than previously. In addition, quality of service needs to be continuously assessed against the context of increasing student numbers. It is therefore useful to be able to provide evidence that we achieve certain standards of customer service and value for money, through the Charter Mark certification. We felt that valuable lessons could be learned from industries that provide targeted and specific services at point of need, adapting and changing according to customer feedback and requirements. But we did not feel that these were directly applicable in an academic library environment. The Charter Mark framework was developed with public services in mind and seemed to echo very much the way in which library & information services saw itself in relation to its customer base. We were concerned that because Charter Mark is focused on public-sector organisations there would be little in it for an academic library. However, Swansea and Bolton Universities shared with us their experiences of achieving Charter Mark status and confirmed our view that it was the right approach for Aston. In addition, we felt that the decision to apply and the application process itself could provide the impetus, over a period of time, to improve standards by analyses of gaps or shortfalls in meeting the criteria and establishing actions to meet them.

## HOW WE STARTED

Library & information services had been looking at the Charter Mark standard on and off for a few years, but had not found the necessary impetus to do anything about it. It is certainly not something to be taken lightly and, although hardly life-changing, it does indeed change for good the way in which you view your services and your customers. It leads to a questioning of all our assumptions about what students and staff want from a library service and how we can incorporate their views into the strategic planning process.

The final decision to apply came largely as a result of Jill Lambert announcing her plan to retire in September 2007. Charter Mark had long been one of her aspirations and now it was agreed that it would be her swan song, so to speak.

The timing was not great. During the summer of 2007, just as we needed to get the application together, the library was also committed to imple-

menting a new library management system (LMS) – not a brilliant combination. Almost all the staff were involved one way or another with developing the specification for the new LMS, undertaking site visits to other universities with the same system or preparing existing data ready for migration – so who did that leave for Charter Mark? Even with limited staff resources, we managed to consult and involve staff at all levels in the library (an important process in itself in relation to fulfilling Charter Mark). The task of writing the Charter Mark application fell to our small Charter Mark task force.

#### THINKING OF APPLYING?

The Charter Mark government national standard for customer service for organisations delivering public services is independently and rigorously evaluated and assessed against six broad criteria, as listed below, but the fundamental question at the heart of the criteria is: 'What does the customer expect or hope for from the services you offer?' In applying for Charter Mark, we had to ensure that we are consulting and listening to our customers' views as well as acting and delivering on what they would like.

The six Charter Mark criteria are as follows:

- Set standards and perform well.
- Actively engage with your customers, partners and staff.
- Be fair and accessible to everyone and promote choice.
- Continuously develop and improve.
- Use your resources effectively and imaginatively.
- Contribute to improving opportunities and quality of life in the communities you serve.

Some of the benefits of attaining the Charter Mark standard are listed below, but, from the experience of existing Charter Mark holders in the academic library sector, the benefits can be more wide-ranging or unexpected. It:

- underpins everything we do and makes us question existing assumptions
- improves customer service and customer awareness
- improves staff motivation/communication
- ensures staff involvement in the whole planning process
- can lead to greater liaison within the university and beyond
- demonstrates that we care about our users

- gives recognition to the library for services
- provides an opportunity for good public relations
- confers the kudos of joining a small number of university libraries who have achieved Charter Mark
- can provide an external benchmark for customer services
- provides a framework for front-line staff to be involved in suggesting operational changes, since they hold the key to this award.

Inevitably there are aspects that may be negative. These include:

- the additional workload involved in applying for an award
- the effort involved in monitoring a service balanced against actually delivering and developing the service
- a possible negative effect on staff morale if workloads are increased
- staff perceptions that it is they who are being monitored or assessed rather than the service
- difficulty of interpreting the assessment criteria for our particular situation
- the cost of the application
- the need to reapply every three years if an award is made
- the idea that we already have a good service so the whole process is simply paper-chasing.

#### THE APPLICATION PROCESS

Detailed information about the Charter Mark application process is available on the Cabinet Office web site, including an on-line self-assessment tool. For Aston LIS, a pre-assessment consultation with the accredited assessor provided invaluable guidance on the application process and helped us to identify aspects of the service for which we needed to gather more evidence against the criteria. It was well worth the investment and this took away most of the anxiety and concern that the undertaking might be too great. The application process involved submitting a detailed written account explaining how the library met the criteria for the standards, with matching evidence provided. The application was submitted prior to the two-day assessment visit. The assessment visit entailed various interviews with key stakeholders, library staff and customers, an analysis/examination of the evidence and observations of the service points in the library.

## **SO HOW DID ASTON'S LIBRARY & INFORMATION SERVICES DO?**

We passed! Our level of compliance with the standard was just over 80%. These are the key areas on which we will be concentrating our efforts over the next 12 months, as highlighted by the assessment exercise:

### *Consultation*

Although there is consultation between library & information services staff and academic staff in setting and reviewing standards, there is room to improve the same consultations with students and to offer clear linkages between the standards set and customer comments.

Whilst information is provided in plain language, it is not clear whether the way it is being provided meets the needs and preferences of our customers.

### *Monitoring of performance*

Service performance, though it is monitored in all areas, is not always set against key standards. A more comprehensive overall monitor would give customers a better view of performance.

Whilst there is evidence that the library provides a value-for-money service, there should be more evidence of independent assessment.

## **WHAT DOES IT ALL MEAN?**

There was a considerable amount of work involved in writing the application, gathering all the evidence and then in the assessment itself. This all took place in October 2007. The relief and satisfaction of being awarded Charter Mark was short-lived as we were thrown straight into a new academic year and all the hustle and bustle associated with it. When we finally drew a breath it was Christmas and already we were facing demands from students for longer opening hours and more computers. Engaging directly with our customers and their requirements and acting upon their needs (a key principle of Charter Mark) allows scope to make changes that are specific to our customers, not generic changes. For Aston this has meant a commitment to extend opening hours, and from April 2008 we will be open for 24 hours six days a week.

However, further work is still required in ensuring that the Charter Mark accreditation has a positive impact on the library service and the

university also, and so it goes on. The Charter Mark certification is valid for three years, subject to annual assessment. Our assessor will conduct a review visit in October 2008 and we hope to be prepared.