
Make the numbers count: improving students' learning experiences



Jan Conway
Assistant Director (Academic Services) University of the Arts London
Tel: 020 7514 8452
E-mail: j.conway@arts.ac.uk



Tania Olsson
Assistant Learning Resources Manager University of the Arts London
Tel: 020 75147833
E-mail: t.olsson@chelsea.arts.ac.uk



Nick Veale
Assistant Information Services Librarian University of the Arts London
Tel: 020 7514 6875
E-mail: n.veale@lcc.arts.ac.uk

At the University of the Arts London (UAL) we have become increasingly aware that while feedback on Library and Learning Resources (LLR) and its services is received from a very extensive range of sources, it still remains difficult to extract meaningful data from these records. It is particularly challenging to extract detailed and relevant information about the individual learning experience of our diverse students, in their interactions with our services and our staff.

Gathering data for a recent internal service review, we felt that there was still a lot which was not understood or was not being asked of our students about their experience of using UAL libraries. We also felt that this feedback would prove extremely helpful for future decision-making about service design and delivery. We particularly wanted to learn more about issues of access and support for students studying at UAL who are

from groups which are currently under-represented in higher education.

TEACHING AND PROFESSIONAL FELLOWSHIP

The award of a University Teaching and Professional Fellowship provided us with an opportunity to look beyond usage figures, gate counts and percentage satisfaction levels, to extend and add to our knowledge-base of what students at UAL really think and feel about academic libraries.

The title of our project reflected our aspiration for the Fellowship, which was to enable the project team, as LLR staff, to hear the student voice and to get to know and learn about real people and not just look at the numbers!

Make the numbers count allowed us to gather new qualitative data through semi-structured student interviews. We then compared this information to our existing sources of feedback to establish if the themes and issues which arose challenged or correlated with what we already knew about use and non-use of LLR at UAL.

The main focus of the project was to explore the particular experience of students who are the first in their family to go to university and who are currently studying at four of our six colleges. Research has shown that 'first generation' students make up a large and significant proportion of students who are now entering higher education through the expansion of participation in university and tertiary-level study.¹

Talking to first generation students was a key element of the Fellowship and the greatest source of learning for the project team.

The research took place over three academic terms in 2007-2008 and included a literature review to underpin and inform our project findings as well as a survey of current activity relating to widening participation developments at other university libraries. The project team comprised Jan Conway *Assistant Director (Academic Services)*, Tania Olsson *Assistant Learning Resources Manager (Chelsea)* and Nick Veale *Assistant Information Services Librarian (London College of Communication)*.

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UAL plays an important national leadership role in promoting widening participation in arts higher education. It was a driving force behind the creation of the National Arts Learning Network (NALN).

NALN is a Lifelong Learning Network involving specialist arts colleges in England and funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and it has proved significant in the development of practice and academic research in respect of widening participation in arts higher education. In addition, UAL is the higher education partner with the Sorrell Foundation in the development and delivery of the *Young Design Programme*. Six institutions now deliver this programme across England.

These and other activities underpin the university's vision to be 'the leading institution in promoting widening participation in arts higher education.' The UAL widening participation strategy 2009-2011 responds to recent statements on widening participation made by both HEFCE and the Department for Innovation, Universities & Skills (DIUS).² Widening participation and fair access remains one of HEFCE's four core aims as detailed in HEFCE's Strategic Plan 2006-2011 (updated May 2008)³ One of these key objectives is 'to embed widening participation in the corporate policy and practice of Higher Education Institutions'.

The UAL widening participation strategy seeks to ensure that widening participation initiatives focus not only on 'outreach' and recruitment, but also on the progression, retention and achievement of UAL students.

This national and university context provided the background and foundation for our research.

PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH

The fundamental aim of the Fellowship was to increase our understanding of first generation students and their learning journey at UAL. We wanted to identify any challenges or barriers to access and services experienced by this student group, in order to establish how the library and its staff might need to change to remove these obstacles to learning. The emphasis of the project would be to gain an understanding of how we, as staff, and our services might change, not the students. We also believed that by making things better for 'widening participation' students we would improve services for everyone.

First generation students are a very diverse group, comprising full-time, part-time, mature, young, home, European Union and international students. As a group, they are also important in terms of

current research into issues of access, retention and success in higher education.⁴

We know that all new students can find themselves in unfamiliar territory as they transition to higher education, but first generation students may experience more extreme 'academic shock' because they have no one in their family who has gone to university before them to help them to understand all the unwritten and unspoken ground-rules of academia. Parental influence, education and cultural experience have a significant effect on student transition to tertiary level education⁵ and also on student integration into the wider university environment, particularly in relation to the transmission of tacit knowledge through the family.⁶ We were interested to see how these issues might relate to students' experiences and use of the UAL libraries.

METHODOLOGY

The project team undertook a series of semi-structured student interviews and noted staff 'conversations' to probe and clarify individual experiences of using the UAL libraries. A total of twelve recorded staff interviews, seven noted staff conversations and eleven student interviews took place. The aim was to stimulate reflection, explore recurring themes and to learn about student use of current services, about their perceptions of libraries and librarians and to debate some potential pilot service enhancements.

One of the first things that we needed to learn in order to start the interviews, was how to obtain ethics clearance for pedagogical research. This was new territory for the project team but a very worthwhile experience in terms of building foundations of best practice for future research in the department.

We also took the opportunity to think more critically about student feedback, its real purpose and use, and how we might choose to ensure an ongoing dialogue with staff and students in the future. This reflection is now informing on-going debates at library and university level on future planning for gathering student feedback.

FIRST GENERATION STUDENT EXPERIENCES

The students we talked to were very open in their discussions with us. They frequently offered and shared solutions with the interviewers, seeking to resolve the difficulties that they described. They provided positive affirmation of the strengths of

LLR and its staff as well as candid criticism of some areas of the service and operation. We were struck by their willingness to share their experiences in the anticipation that the information we gathered during the Fellowship would be used to 'make things better' and improve the student experience of all UAL students in the future.

We asked students about their prior experience of libraries, before coming to UAL. We talked to them about their introduction to LLR and their first impressions of the libraries they used. We asked them which services and collections proved most useful to them, how they found out about these, and what they felt was good and bad about LLR. We discussed whether they thought that LLR and its services had any impact on their success on their course, and asked for their views on potential pilot services.

The conversations ranged far and wide and a broad range of topics emerged. Several issues recurred during these conversations. These key themes included:

- the crucial importance of orientation pre-entry and induction at the commencement of courses;
- the significance of tutors as the pivotal point of referral to the library and to reading for the course;
- the impact that assumptions of 'tacit knowledge' or the lack of it can have in terms of creating a barrier to academic library use;
- the need for 'comfort' in relation to space to work and study and the importance of the learning environment to students;
- varied expectations and perceptions about books and reading and what constitutes independent learning;
- diverse perceptions and expectations of libraries and librarians;
- a lack of awareness of online information and e-resources;
- some frustration with technology and access to IT particularly at stress points on the course;
- confusion about the use of jargon and signage in UAL libraries;
- the specific needs of students with disabilities and, in particular, dyslexic students.

We also established that there were a startling number of important 'facts' about LLR provision which the students did not know at all, which immediately began to raise questions about the effectiveness of current induction arrangements,

the accessibility of staff and about communication methods between LLR and its users.

We then examined these findings by exploring them further in conversation with a range of LLR and other UAL staff and talked about the effective use of our libraries and the skills of our library staff. We also looked at these issues as described and analysed in the literature of these subjects,⁷ and gathered information from other university libraries about how they supported students from groups which are currently under-represented in higher education. We produced a final report for the project in July 2008.

A one page summary of the findings and key recommendations was produced to circulate to staff and students to inform them of the key issues identified and to describe what action LLR would now take as a result of this research.

STUDENT VOICES

The students we talked to during this study were all first generation entrants to higher education. This provided a very helpful and relevant 'lens' and focus for the project. Looking back and reflecting upon what we found however, we believe that the issues that these students raised and the learning styles and preferences they described would also have emerged from other groups of students.

This feeling was validated by other research projects which involved listening to students, carried out at the university over the last year. These projects identified similar messages and key themes to the ones we established through the Fellowship research, such as the impact of induction overload, a call for an incremental approach to knowledge acquisition and skills development and the need to de-mystify the language of higher education.

CONCLUSION

Make the numbers count achieved a number of outcomes we believe will be beneficial for LLR at UAL. Our research enabled us to establish a number of recommendations for action which are achievable and will improve services. We also identified two potential pilot services to research and trial in more depth over the next academic year. The first pilot will be to institute and test-out SMS (Short Message Service) text messaging. The second entails the development of new guidelines and procedures for the extension of one-to-one

subject librarian and student information resource and skills sessions, across the department.

We learned a lot about assumptions made by staff and by students about libraries and library services. This learning will be fed into forthcoming staff development programmes and will also be used to inform the future redevelopment of information skills programmes.

The Fellowship also provided the chance to build and develop new and existing relationships with academic colleagues, as well as widening participation, study support and student services staff.

We want to continue to strive to know our library users well. It is this knowledge of the reality of studying in higher education today, and a current understanding of the demands being made of students in their daily lives, that will shape and define a truly relevant and effective service.

As a service, LLR values creativity and difference and our vision is "to be at the heart of learning and discovery in the Arts." To achieve this we will need to challenge assumptions, both our own and others. We need to continue to gather evidence which helps to break down stereotypes of students and of libraries and librarians. Through listening to student voices, this project enabled us to enhance our understanding of the identity and requirements of the diverse communities which are part of UAL. We know that this will improve our ability to support all our students to become successful and fully independent learners. As one student we interviewed put it:

'... [I]n the library I feel that they will help direct you here and there and then you will grow not to need them.'

The authors would be very happy to answer any questions about this project and the outcomes of our research.

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