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# Rove West



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The University of the West of England (UWE) Library, based at the Frenchay campus, has had, for several years, self-issue machines available to users and 24-hour opening. These developments were implemented to enhance the service to our users by responding to demands from students to have library access throughout the evening and night. To enable 24-hour opening we needed to provide as many facilities as possible to users during the period when the library is staffed by university security officers only, and so we have been keen to develop a self-service culture. Ideally we would like to enable students, and academic staff, to self-issue, place a hold, look up items on the library catalogue, renew and search electronic resources. This is where roving comes into its own, although, as we show below, it needs to be done the right way to engage library staff and really help users.

## REASONS TO ROVE

There had been a feeling for some time that roving would be an improvement to our service; indeed, roving had been attempted at UWE several times in the past. At one point a librarian based at the enquiry desk would march off with a 'Can I help you?' clipboard, but this petered out because they didn't seem to find any demand for this service, yet at the same our collection assistants consistently report that they are approached by students while they are shelving. There's nothing like having a book in your hand to mark you out as

one of the librarians in student eyes, and perhaps the clipboard was too scary!

More recently staff working as part of the service-desk team were encouraged to 'rove the queue' and invite students out of the queue to use the self-service machines. Unfortunately technical issues, coupled with students not always knowing their PIN, quickly led to staff feeling very silly and unwilling to subject themselves or the students to this activity.

## PLANNING

When we decided to reintroduce roving we knew a different approach would be needed. Following attendance on CILIP's 'roving with a purpose' course, visits were made to universities where staff were roving successfully. We decided quite quickly that we would ask library assistants and senior library assistants to rove; our professionally qualified staff tended to have less flexibility and would be more difficult to rota due to faculty commitments and many meetings. We also felt that it should be a voluntary activity initially; a few enthusiastic rovers would be much more likely to convince reluctant rovers than trying to make everyone participate. Armed with lots of new ideas we set about introducing the idea to staff.

The first step was to have a no-pressure question-and-answer session. An e-mail was sent to all library assistants and senior library assistants inviting them to come to an informal coffee-time meeting where they could learn more about a new way of helping students. Describing roving in this way and making the meeting informal was really important in setting the tone for what we wanted to achieve: a group of willing and enthusiastic rovers.

## PREPARATIONS

After the meeting 23 out of 37 library assistants and senior library assistants signed up to attend the training. Like the meeting, this was kept very informal and was done in smaller groups. We weren't really sure what the rovers would be asked about so we wanted to start with basic directional help and then we planned to build in more training as the term went on, depending on what the rovers felt they needed.

We started the training sessions by asking each participant what they most feared being asked. Overwhelmingly the staff were worried about

Pharos (our printing system) and memory sticks, so we went through the whole process of crediting an account, sending documents to print and printing them at a print release station. Similarly we looked at memory sticks and talked through some basic troubleshooting. All our library assistants and senior library assistants have had library catalogue training and had been introduced to the library portal: UWEelibrary. We emphasised that if a rover doesn't know how to help, it is fine to take a student to the enquiry desk but that they should take the student and hand over the enquiry. Quite often rovers will stay to hear the answer too.

After the training each rover received a folder full of 'how-to' guides and notes, plus campus and library maps. Rovers can customise these and are welcome to take them roving with them if they like. We also have a master copy at the reception desk.

We decided not to mark rovers out in any way except insisting that they wear their staff ID badge on a blue lariat, which is distinct from the red worn by other UWE staff. We also considered using walkie-talkies to contact rovers but felt this would bring too much noise pollution on quiet floors. This is something we might investigate further in the future as we still feel that being able to contact the rovers would be helpful.

### **ROVING**

We began roving on 29 September 2008. This was great because the new students had all arrived and needed lots of beginners' help so the rovers didn't feel too worried that the students would know more than they did. From the beginning the rovers were coming back from their shifts with really positive comments: 'I love roving', said one senior library assistant. It was the first time a lot of these staff had experienced the little job-well-done glow librarians are used to feeling all the time when they do enquiry-desk duties.

We held a couple of feedback sessions to find out how things were going and whether more training is needed, but the basic level of training seems to have been sufficient. The most common type of question is about locating items on the shelves. It's continued to do quite well; we've adjusted the rota so that rovers start at the same time as service-desk shifts to make them feel more a part of the desk team. There have also been times when rovers report that the floors are very quiet and there isn't a lot to do: staff find this a bit uncom-

fortable when they have plenty of work at their desks, so we've responded to this by allowing rovers to return to their offices for a while at quiet periods, but more work could be done in devising a checklist of activities like tidying workspaces, putting books on bay-end trolleys, tidying trolley parks and checking information-spinners.

Interestingly we have had increased queues at the service desk because students come to ask a question and the staff know the answer and are confident about answering so they no longer want to send students to the enquiry desk. Other staff have reported an increase in the number of questions they are getting while they are walking between offices. We take both of these as positive indicators that staff are feeling comfortable helping students and want to help, and that students are getting used to the idea that if they approach someone they will get some support. The number of queries at the enquiry desk has not been affected so we feel rovers are probably helping students who would not have asked and would have continued to struggle.

### **THE FUTURE**

We are implementing RFID this summer (2009) and removing our service desk completely. This will accompany a shake-up of our services, how we offer them and the staffing model we use. Roving will be a key part of this and we will use the summer to refresh training and add in some optional modules on laptops and the law collection. Plus we will be training the library assistants who haven't been involved in roving so far, as they are now interested in joining in. We need to do some more work on investigating the use of pagers so that we can contact rovers to come to the desk and take someone to locate a book, for example, and we intend to come up with a list of tasks that rovers could be doing when things are a little quiet.

Our top tips for getting your staff roving:

- 1 Find the right model for your staff. We approached roving in a casual, low-pressure way because we felt this would work best at UWE – ask yourself what would work for your library.
- 2 Empower your staff. By addressing people's fears in the training our staff felt much more capable of helping students. One of the most positive aspects of roving is empowering library staff to help users with a number of

queries, giving them the opportunity to feel they can spend time with a user at the same time as developing themselves.

- 3 Get your timing right. Starting at the beginning of term means rovers are likely to encounter basic enquiries first, which helps to build their confidence.
- 4 Be flexible. It might not be perfect right away – we've adjusted things a bit as we've gone along.
- 5 Try it! Although we had always believed in roving we needed to find the right model before it worked. Don't be disheartened if you do have to try a few different approaches. We have now found an approach that works for us and it is a success.

#### **REFERENCE**

- 1 Collections assistants: these are a team of five staff who work four-hour shifts each day. They do shelving and help with returned material at the service desk, as well as a variety of other tasks.