

Creating pre-arrival library support for international students



Sue Marshall
Academic Liaison Librarian
Coventry University
s.marshall@coventry.ac.uk

Introduction

It is widely accepted that many international students have very different experiences of using libraries in their home countries, and using an academic library in the UK for the first time can be daunting. Although international students at Coventry University are offered a library induction, along with home students, it doesn't cover the level of detail that some may need. In addition, due to problems with visas, many international students arrive late, missing induction altogether. For these reasons, it was felt that additional support was needed before students arrive in the UK, to help prepare them to get the most out of the library as soon as possible.

Like many higher education institutions, Coventry University has a high number of international students from many different countries. As well as students from EU countries, the largest national groups include those from China, India, Pakistan, the Middle East and Nigeria.

Two subject librarians took on the task of investigating the nature of support that was needed and how to deliver it. The project was supported by the Disruptive Media Learning Lab (DMLL), which was formed in September 2014 to research new and innovative ways of teaching and learning and to drive development at Coventry University. The DMLL was based in the library and the subject librarians were part of their team along with researchers, developers and learning technologists. This was one of the first projects they supported; it was considered innovative in that support is not usually offered before arrival and students would not normally be involved in its development. Collaboration with students was a factor that the DMLL was keen to support. The DMLL provided technical and general advice and funding, and managed student collaboration.

Research

At the start it wasn't clear what form the pre-induction support would take, other than it would be something offered online. We knew we wanted it to be multimedia, engaging, possibly interactive, and something students could easily dip in and out of. However, this was what librarians thought, rather than the students, so before we started we needed to do some research. We began by arranging a focus group, which was delivered in the style of a workshop, and putting the students into small discussion groups; the students then fed back their thoughts to the whole group. We were aware that some international students may be reluctant to express their opinion and we felt they were more likely to do this in a smaller group setting. We did gain some useful feedback, but felt the results were unbalanced as we discovered that most of the students who attended were on the same course, MA Human Resource Management, having been encouraged to come by their course tutor.

Within the focus group we explored their experiences of using libraries in their home countries, what they were expecting from Coventry University library, whether it met their expectations, difficulties they encountered, what they would have liked to know before arrival, in what form they would like that help to be given, and when they would like to use this help.

Key findings were that in their home countries, libraries often had shorter opening hours, less material, staff didn't always offer help or training, and it could be more time consuming finding books. They were also not expected to read around their subject; they were more reliant on a few key textbooks.

In some countries students had limited access to e-resources, books were reference-only and they couldn't do their own printing and photocopying. Generally, they were not encouraged to be as independent in their use of the library as they are in the UK and self-service was not an expectation.

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The kind of help they said would have liked included 'how-to' videos for borrowing and returning books, finding their way around and signposting other support services. There were a number of suggestions for the format of this help, including quizzes, advice from current / previous students, podcasts videos, pdf guides, animations and online chat.

To supplement the information collected in the focus group, we ran a survey, from which we received a very good response and obtained useful information to inform the development of our online support. It was set up through Bristol Online Surveys and was distributed through the university's international office, key academics who have contact with international students, pre-sessional tutors and on the library's website.

The responses to the survey represented 42 different countries, the highest number being received from students from China, India and Nigeria, which is fairly representative of the student population. The responses also corresponded to the numbers in each of the four faculties.

The survey findings reflect the findings in the focus group. The main differences between the libraries in their home countries and Coventry University (CU) library was that there were more resources (both print and electronic) at CU, and the physical space was much larger and better equipped. It therefore followed that they wanted help with understanding the processes, finding books on the shelves, accessing online material, printing and photocopying and using self-issue and return. They would like this help to be delivered through an online environment, but, surprisingly, in the form of pdf guides. They also liked the idea of short film clips, virtual tours, and advice from other students and, to a lesser extent, animations and quizzes.

Development

With the knowledge gained from the focus group and survey we set about developing the content and deciding what platform to present it on. Technologists in the DMLL advised that this could be achieved using a Wordpress site, which IT Services then set up; it would be easy to maintain without having to involve technical staff. Next we created pdfs about our services, facilities, how to find books, printing and photocopying, finding help and library words (glossary). In collaboration with students we created two films, one of student advice and the other introducing the subject librarians. We were also assisted by a colleague who used Captivate to create a short tutorial and quiz to explain how books are ordered and shelved.

We called the site PALS – Pre-arrival Library Support – as it is memorable, describes what it does, is inviting and friendly.

Challenges

When the idea of the pre-arrival support was conceived, we rather naively thought that we would have a free hand to create it in a way we felt was appropriate. However, we soon learned that there were university procedures we had to comply with. First, because we were running focus groups and surveys, we had to obtain ethics approval, which was a bureaucratic, but necessary process. The site also had to be approved by the university marketing department, as it would be viewed by people outside the university. The marketing approval alerted us to a number of points that we hadn't considered, e.g. search engine optimisation (SEO). We didn't consider this to be a high priority as we were giving the web address to students once they had been offered a place, so they didn't need to search for the site. Another consideration was the size of some of the images we had used; they were too large and would take too long to load onto mobile devices. This was important to us, so we had to re-size the images.

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We were not able simply to set up a site ourselves: it had to be set up by IT Services after we had gone through the correct channels of approval.

What had started out as quite a simple project became quite complex because of the interplay between the various university departments. This inevitably meant that the project took longer to complete. The aim had been to make the site available around mid-August in preparation for the arrival of the international students around mid-September. Due to various delays it was delivered to students the weekend before induction week, which was not ideal as it was supposed to be pre-induction support.

A further complication was the major refurbishment of two of the floors in the library. This had not been planned at the time of starting our project, but meant that these floors were closed from the beginning of June until Induction week. For this reason we were unable to take any photographs or videos in the library. This hampered us, as we would have liked to include a lot of images and a virtual tour, both of which we were unable to do for the initial package.

Continuous development and evaluation

It is our intention to keep the site up to date as changes are made to library services and facilities. We have now included images of the newly refurbished library floors, and we hope to develop a virtual tour. We have improved the glossary and created something more interactive.

We are currently running a survey to evaluate the effectiveness of PALS and will use the information gathered to inform future developments. So far the site has been very well received and the informal feedback that we have received from academic staff has been very positive. In spite of the late launch, by the beginning of December 2015 the site had received 25,712 hits, 9803 page views and an average of 76 pages viewed each day. Clearly students felt that this package provided the help they needed as it was tailored specifically to their needs and was something they could return to through the term. As a result, the university induction group is generally looking to increase the amount and timing of pre-arrival information given to students, rather than pushing it out in the very hectic induction week. The success of the package has had wider ramifications for university policy and we hope to build on this for the next academic year.

The site can be accessed at <http://pals.coventry.ac.uk/>

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