

ABSTRACT

Library services are extremely good at surveying their users' needs. Various methodologies have been in use throughout the sector, most commonly the exit survey or questionnaire. They are used primarily to establish what students who use the library are satisfied with and what improvements they would like to see. Within the field of academic librarianship in the UK the SCONUL methodology ¹ is most commonly used and has been employed at St Martin's College Library for the previous three years.

Libraries are less proficient at canvassing the opinions of those who don't use their services. Some attempts have been made within the public sector as part of general community sampling or as surveys of lapsed users. In an academic setting however, it is taken for granted that the students will use the library. The College functions as a closed community with only students registered on its courses allowed borrowing access to materials, and the library stock and services are directly aimed at their specific course needs. In practice, however a significant minority don't use the library services. The perception on the ground is that this trend is increasing. The purpose of this research was to discover if that is in fact the case and what the possible reasons would be for low or non-use of traditional library services. The resulting data and recommendations for improvement have been fed into the library's strategic planning cycle.

BACKGROUND

Education is changing rapidly, the government target of having 50% of all 18 – 30 year olds in higher education by 2010² is in part driving the rapid movement towards more open and distance learning. Advances in technology are making possible virtual classrooms and online learning, this coupled with the growth in society's access to ICT is altering student's perceptions of what the library service has to offer them. If we are to maintain our relevance in the cycle of student needs then the library service must adapt and change. Listening to the needs of those who choose not to use our services is one way

Information Access Survey at St Martin's College April 2005: an investigation into the non-use of library services by current students

of being responsive to that change. Philip Payne, Head of Learning Support Services at Leeds Metropolitan University argued that, ‘there is an increasing focus in academic libraries on users and in meeting their needs. Measuring the impact of our services potentially forms part of having a customer focus.’³

St Martin’s College is a Church of England Higher Education institution located in the North West of England with 11274 students (6839 FTE). 5918 are on part time courses and of those 181 are on courses taught at a distance. The College is multi-site having three main campuses in Lancaster, Ambleside and Carlisle. Courses are also provided from Barrow, Whitehaven, Newcastle, Tower Hamlets and Woolwich. In each of these locations the library services are provided in conjunction with another service provider. At Barrow and Whitehaven the library is situated in the NHS Trust facilities, at Woolwich they are in the Woolwich Polytechnic Boy’s School and at Tower Hamlets they are part of the Tower Hamlets Schools Library Service.

The portfolio of courses taught at St Martin’s centres on Professional Programmes within the areas of Health and Education. The largest faculty is Education providing Initial Teacher Training at both undergraduate and postgraduate level to both primary and secondary school teaching, with primary being the bulk of the work. The Faculty also runs a masters programme and has an active research base. Increasingly the work is branching out to Continuing Professional Development courses which are short in duration or taught off campus. A large part of this work is done at a distance or with only infrequent sessions taught on a campus.

The Faculty of Health and Social Care provides a large number of education and training opportunities to students, nurses and allied health professionals. These range from pre-registration nursing training to continuing professional development opportunities on specific subjects. In the main these latter run as short modules and are many are taught

Information Access Survey at St Martin’s College April 2005: an investigation into the non-use of library services by current students

from Barrow and Whitehaven. Some nursing courses such as the Preparing Mentors course are fractional and supported entirely by distance learning.

Finally the Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences teaches a broad range of subjects notably Business, Youth work, Counselling, Sport and Outdoor Studies (Ambleside), English and Art etc. They are developing a series of courses which run only in the summer.

The library service aims to provide a common service framework enabling all students to receive the same quality of service regardless of where they are physically based. Given this we encourage students to make use of online facilities such as reservations, self-renewal and electronic resources. In addition we recognise that the growth in distance learning courses has placed some students in a difficult position as they visit the campus infrequently and therefore find it hard to get to the library regularly. In order to assist we offer a postal loan service whereby students can request books via the internet, we post them out and the student is responsible for returning them either by post or in person on their next base day. Items which have been reserved by another student are not able to be renewed and must be returned.

The Corporate Plan of the College outlines in its vision for the future that St Martin's will,

*Improve its ability to listen to and respond to students, their needs and aspirations.*⁴

In line with that sentiment, the Library Service Strategic Plan states in Aim 1.2 that the service desires to,

*Critically evaluate Library Services to assess impact and introduce service enhancements.*⁵

If we don't know what all our users want, how can we hope to provide a suitable service for them? As Peter Brophy, Director of CERLIM at Manchester Metropolitan University

Information Access Survey at St Martin's College April 2005: an investigation into the non-use of library services by current students

suggests, 'Users do not use services in the way we think they do,' this he goes on to claim is, 'partly because librarians are inconsistent in our promotion of services.'⁶ A principle aim of this piece of practitioner research is to identify the alternative ways that the non users at St Martin's are adopting to engage with the resources needed for their assignments and what, if anything, we need to do to further promote our services to them.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A review of current research in this area proved to be extremely disappointing. The University of Abertay, Dundee did conduct a student survey in the spring of 2004⁷ which was aimed at student use of electronic resources only. This research found that, 'the main reasons for infrequent or non-use of resources is lack of awareness and perceived lack of relevance. Lack of time is also a barrier.' Non user surveys have been conducted in the public sector for example, Coventry (2000), Leeds (2001), and Warrington (2002). These were conducted generally through the post as a questionnaire or as street surveys using a professional market research company. An article by Margaret Hawkins (1991) on a lapsed borrower survey in Essex, 'Where have all the issues gone?'⁸, found that changes in ICT usage and the internet were the prime causes of non use along with conflicting demands on leisure time from a competitive society. The most cited cause being 'lack of time' to read. Further examples of non-user surveys were discovered in Australia (Upper Goulburn) and America (Jefferson County). Louise Flowers from Upper Goulburn comments that, 'as yet the professional literature does not acknowledge the topic of non-users in its own right, probably because there is only a small body of research that specifically addresses this issue.'⁹

METHODOLOGY

The research project was conducted over a three month period between March and May 2005. 2189 Questionnaires were posted to students who registered as low or non- users according to the library database, TALIS. Low use was defined as students who had borrowed three items or less in a year. This amounted to 21% of total student numbers.

Information Access Survey at St Martin's College April 2005: an investigation into the non-use of library services by current students

As non-users were deemed to be a difficult target audience to contact, a further 800 questionnaires were distributed to classrooms. Only those who indicated that they rarely or never used the library were analysed as part of the research. The remainder were analysed separately as a distinct 'User Survey'. The results were collated using the SPSS statistical software package.

AIMS

The aim of this project is to investigate the level of non-use of traditional library services at St Martin's College and to ascertain the reasons why some students are not engaging with the printed material available to them. To this end several questions were analysed:

- What other sources are being used to satisfy the students' information needs?
- Whether age, gender or mode of study has any bearing on usage?
- Whether traditional opening hours are convenient for this user group?
- How many of the target group have access to a PC and how much use is made of the Internet and other electronic resources?
- What effect changing patterns of teaching and learning have had on the use of traditional library services?
- Whether the target group received a library induction in any form and how this was perceived by those who had received it?
- How this group of students perceives the library service?
- How the library service could improve in order to encourage this group of students to make more use of the services available.

FINDINGS

The project returned a 28% response rate which was above that expected. Over half of those were based at our satellite sites of Barrow, Whitehaven and Tower Hamlets and

Information Access Survey at St Martin's College April 2005: an investigation into the non-use of library services by current students

were, in fact users of those libraries. This data was not initially known as the satellite sites do not use TALIS. Therefore the actual numbers of non users was reduced to 14%.

The Carlisle campus has the highest incidence of non-use in comparison with student numbers; however, statistically the Lancaster campus returned the largest number of responses. The Faculty of Health and Social care has both the highest incidence of non-use overall and the highest incidence of non-use at the Lancaster site but of those over half do use other university or NHS libraries through successful reciprocal access schemes such as UK Libraries Plus. Two courses in particular, Nurse Practitioners and Preparing Mentors for Professional Learning and Development showed the highest levels of non use and these areas will be targeted for further work by library and academic staff.

The data confirmed that 78% of the non-users in the College were female, 95% were mature students and over three quarters were on part time or distance learning courses. Changing patterns of learning are affecting library use with 41% of respondents being on a course supported by Open and Distance learning and distance from the library being the single biggest factor cited by respondents (68%) of non-use. Many respondents were unclear about the question asking if they were on a designated distance learning course and one recommendation is that the College re-examines its use of the terminology to ensure that it is relevant, meaningful and easily understood by students.

It is clear from the responses that many students were not aware of some of the services on offer such as postal loans and web services. The library needs to do much more in terms of promotion. More training was requested by students, particularly in ICT skills for mature students and those who struggle with computers.

Only a third of non-users made any use of the College's electronic resources and fewer than 10% accessed the e books collection. Many claimed that they either did not know about the resources or that they did not know how to use them. Several students cited

Information Access Survey at St Martin's College April 2005: an investigation into the non-use of library services by current students

lack of confidence as a factor in non-use of electronic journals, databases and e books and requested further training. The library service invests heavily in the provision of electronic resources but these are under utilized through lack of awareness, knowledge and training. Without reference to this material student assignments can lack the breadth and depth required of them as the College aims at its own degree awarding status. Much more needs to be done to raise students' abilities in understanding and investigating these resources. In contrast to this 88% of respondents claimed to use the Internet as a source for their assignments. This may be at the expense of higher quality library electronic resources paid for by the College.

First year students represent the largest group of non-users with second year and diploma students the second biggest groups. This indicates the importance of high quality, timely induction at the beginning of courses. Induction was analysed in terms of take up with tours being seen as more useful than Power Point presentations. A third of all respondents claim not to have been offered any form of induction. These tended to be the students taught from remote locations and the library needs to develop creative alternative induction packages for those not taught on a main campus.

An interesting factor was that over 70% of non-users said that they bought their own copies of books and a further 44% borrowed from their friends. This could be explained by the fact that many are mature students who may have more demands on their time in terms of work and family commitments. As one student said, *I buy all my essay books from Amazon and have them delivered to my house.*'

In contrast to the surveys of non-users in public libraries 'lack of time' was only a factor in 15% of cases analysed. St Martin's does not open its libraries 24/7 and surprisingly, opening hours, which were expected to be a prime reason for non-use were cited by a mere 6.5% of students. Perhaps non-users who live at a distance would not be able to use the library no matter how long it was open.

Information Access Survey at St Martin's College April 2005: an investigation into the non-use of library services by current students

When asked to consider improvements to the service, a range of comments were made. Students inevitably requested more book stock, in particular books and journals. They asked for improved inductions and training from the library, *have an idiot's step-by-step guide to take away and use from home*. Some asked for easier online access, this was particularly in relation to password difficulties via Athens authentication protocols for the databases. The College is currently working towards establishing a single sign on for the network. Comments about staffing tended to acknowledge that staff were extremely busy and often have little time, *Have more people on the desk – there is always a big queue*. There were also several positive comments received, *whenever I use the library the service has been excellent*.

CONCLUSION

The fact that few responses came from the main body of undergraduate or taught postgraduate campus-based courses, suggests that the work which the library is currently doing with these groups is working well and that they are being taught library skills and subsequently using the service. The main groups of students who don't use traditional library services are those who may feel on the fringes of the College due to their part time or distance mode of learning. Even then, a third of those are making use of library services nearer to their home or place of work.

In response to Peter Brophy's earlier comment, yes we are inconsistent in our promotion of library services, induction needs to be examined creatively, training is not delivered effectively to all and not all services e.g. postal loans were known to these students. This research has analyzed these inconsistencies and at St Martin's College we will be working hard to redress the balance to provide a more equitable service to all our customers.

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