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**Citation:** Bell, D. (2015). Incorporating student content at City University London Library. *Aliss Quarterly*, 11(1), pp. 15-18.

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## **Incorporating student content at City University London Library**

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### **Introduction**

This paper looks at to what extent it is possible to engage with students and incorporate their experiences, narratives and research interests into library service design provision. It examines the concept of using crowdsourcing principles internally and whether incorporating content and ideas from students is possible. It also looks at patron-driven acquisition based on the interests and suggestions of researchers. Crowdsourcing is normally engaging online with an external community to complete a specific project but in this context it is more about engaging with students and staff. Another way of describing this is: "Crowdsourcing is an innovative way of structuring certain tasks that harnesses the power of many people towards multiple possible ends." Shepherd (2012, p. 11).

### **Students as co-creators of employability resources**

The concept of employability is currently very topical and has been heavily researched within the context of higher education. However, it is not always easy to define it precisely. It is very desirable that students after completing a course of university study are either prepared for the world of work or undertake further study and/ or research.

Employability "... is a complex set of diverse achievements and qualities that goes far beyond mainstream academic achievement. 'Soft' skills, personal qualities, dispositions and other achievements are valued." Knight and Yorke (2004, p. 16).

At City University London Library, myself and three colleagues have worked on an employability project over the past year to develop library support for the University's strategic plan which has employability as one of its core values (City University London, 2012).

We also wished to explore to what extent we could learn from the experiences and narratives of our students and use these to inform and help design our services to support their employability. We wished to take a new perspective on the subject to see if this would be successful. One of my colleagues had previously worked in NHS and Health libraries so we decided to employ the principles of experienced-based design techniques in our project (King's Fund, 2011). These have been used successfully in the health sector to introduce change and the redesign of services based on the experiences, stories and ideas of users. This is very much a qualitative approach to research so we designed a Survey Monkey questionnaire of 17 questions to try and obtain some initial responses from students. We tried to approach different levels of students such as undergraduate, postgraduate, research students from various departments and some administrative and academic staff. These included: Social Sciences, Library Sciences and Business Studies.

The survey contained some free text questions to provide qualitative responses and we asked questions such as:

- What does the term "employability" mean to you?
- Which skills do you think are important for employability?
- How can Library Services assist you with employability?
- Have you used any Library resources in your job searching?
- What is the best piece of Careers advice you would give to others?

We had 24 responses and then based on responses and availability, we held some qualitative interviews with a small number of participants to follow up on these. These interviews were semi-structured so we asked some of the same questions but also expanded on the interview responses to obtain more details of the students' experiences and views. Student narratives are interesting but unless there is a pattern of responses, it may be difficult to develop resources based on individual ideas. Overall, it gave us ideas that employability should be generally embedded into guides and workshops and that some students prefer reading books whereas others prefer online guides and learning. The students we interviewed emphasised the importance of transferable soft and research skills which are also useful in the workplace and this is something Library Services can assist with.

At the same time, our project group also designed an Employability Library guide <http://libguides.city.ac.uk/employability> (City University London, 2015). We designed the structure of the guide and added some content. We wanted some of the content to be internally 'crowdsourced' from our students. We engaged with students via email and Moodle, the virtual learning environment, Moodle and via a web form on the guide itself. We asked for content suggestions and ideas on how to restructure and enhance the guide. We also showed the online guide to the students/ staff we interviewed as above and asked for their comments on the design and content (Deschenes, 2014).

The student feedback was valuable in terms of suggested resources such as websites and the area where more development was requested was the Finding Company Information section. We were fortunate that the feedback was overwhelmingly positive and confirmed our idea that students would find the guide useful. We realised that the guide is a generic one covering all disciplines. Some of the requests we had were very specific and we realised that it is very difficult for us to cover all possible career options. Some of the student suggestions such as websites have been incorporated. We also wished to work in partnership with our Careers Service and signpost each others' services effectively rather than replicate what is already being offered.

We ran a pilot workshop on researching company information in February 2015 and we found that it was fully booked. As with many voluntary training sessions, we later found that a smaller number of students attended. We asked the attendees for feedback on what they found useful, this included how to research a company, preparing for interviews and business databases such as Marketline and Factiva. We then designed 3 workshops based on researching company information; current awareness and news resources and using social media to build an online profile and for job hunting. We found that it is important to offer these workshops at suitable times of year and exam time (April in our case) is not the best time.

### **Read for Research: patron- driven acquisition for research students.**

In November 2013, we began a patron driven acquisition scheme for our research students, something we had not done before. As Nixon et al. (2010, p. 119) state: "Libraries exist for their users, so librarians take user needs into consideration when building collections". We wished to use the research interests of our students to help us to develop our research collections. A name was chosen for the scheme (Read for Research) and a web form was put on our website which makes it very easy for students to request books. We have found the scheme to be very popular and have been able to continue it since, approximately 680 titles have been ordered.

We have found that it is a strong brand and our research students and staff have also developed the concept. One research student has created her own Read for Research reading list on her blog and one of our academics has established a Read for Research Mendeley community. We have created a

'reading list' on our reading list system Talis Aspire. There are some general research titles which are useful for larger groups of students, some very current, topical titles and some very specialised ones. It is clear from this that there is a very large variety of research across different disciplines done at the University. The challenge for us is perhaps to develop a cohesive collection to support changing research needs in the longer term. Initially, the scheme was designed for print book purchases but electronic titles have become more popular particularly in areas such as Law. "Patron-driven acquisition is also a concept that easily and naturally moves beyond the print and media arenas into electronic books" (Nixon et al, 2010, p. 121).

Feedback from our research students has been very positive and students seem to feel valued by having the input into the collections: "Library support for research students has been excellent. I was especially impressed with the #readforresearch campaign, allowing research students to order books using a special library fund ( PhD Research student, City University London)." (Bell, 2015).

## Conclusion

Overall, engaging with students and listening to their experiences and narratives is rewarding and can help to influence the design of services and resources. If students are willing and have time to engage, they can have input in these areas. Student input into our online employability guide has been very useful for us and has enhanced the content. It is very possible that some of the students who are not currently engaging or have not been approached could also be a valuable source of ideas. There are of course constraints of time, money and resourcing and there has to be some clarity about what can be provided. Our experience of patron-driven acquisition based on students' research interests has also been a success for us and has increased student engagement. In the longer term, Library Services may need to look at the balance of research book collections as the titles selected cover a wide range of topics.

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