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Academic Libraries and the Student Journey

Key words

Academic Libraries

Student Journey

Student transition

Student engagement

Student expectations

Editorial – Margaret Weaver, Head of Library and Student Services, University of Cumbria UK

This themed issue of the New Review of Academic Librarianship is documenting the extended role of academic libraries (and their staff) in developing and supporting students across the entire student lifecycle – from pre-entry, to post qualification. The resulting innovative approaches mean working with a much wider range of stakeholders than previously, internally and externally and involving students more pro-actively. Whilst the predominant focus of the articles is undergraduate study, the approach of this themed issue – the student journey - can be applied to all kinds of learners and researchers.

The backdrop for the articles in this issue is the changing current higher education climate and new fees regime introduced in the UK which has just been evaluated by the Higher Education Funding Council for England¹. The financial reforms introduced by the UK government are wide reaching, demanding a whole institutional response to develop services that recruit, retain, and progress students, from first contact to finding a job or career, or further study or research. The higher education market has become more competitive than ever as student number controls are adjusting the student profile and there are fewer students in the system overall. For some, choosing higher education as a next step is a much bigger decision financially than previously, despite the availability of government funded student loans with no “up-front” payment required. As demonstrated by the articles, the developing context of value-added is not just a UK phenomenon. Academic libraries globally are responding robustly and strategically to the challenges, that are often created by government policies combined with the availability of ubiquitous and mobile technology. The changes are in fact seen as opportunities to position academic libraries as major forces in the contemporary model of higher education. We can be certain that student support and retention activity, often taking place in academic libraries, is a strategic matter to successful higher education institutions.

To capture the projects, services and approaches that are being taken to ensure student success across all the stages (or transitions) that students experience, a group of university libraries in the north west of England, North West Academic Libraries, (NoWAL) ran a conference on the student journey. Twenty-seven institutions attended at the University of Cumbria in September 2012, and the papers chosen for this issue were first presented at the conference called “Student Transition and Success”.

Seeing the articles through the lens of the “student journey” (a term that has captured the imagination to describe the stages of higher education from a student perspective), enables practitioners to present and evaluate their work as contributory to a stage in the lives of students. The benefit of the approach acknowledges that higher education learning is complex, that libraries have a key role to play and that this has to be a holistic approach –

¹ Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) Higher Education in England: impact of the 2012 Reforms. (2013): March. www.hefce.ac.uk

educating the whole student. Success depends on engaging students from the outset, both reaching out to students at pre and post entry and drawing students in, including virtually. The library-student relationship is shifting as the articles depict.

To illustrate the range of activity at each stage of student learning, the articles each cover a particular stage in the student lifecycle (although inevitably the student journey is not linear and there is some overlap) and they link theory to practice in varying ways. Their claims to knowledge are practical, situated, and informed by the literature, with rich descriptions of case studies and lessons learned, rather than deep methodological accounts. The use of the conference format as live, action focussed, enhancements of practice is an innovation which emerges from the papers, in effect using the library community of practice in a live environment such as a conference to co-create.

It is the hope of the editor that readers of this themed issue will find the lifecycle approach helpful in determining future strategy; that they are enthused by the positivity and innovation of fellow academic library staff, and that these “stories from the field” find credence with a wide group of professional services colleagues outside librarianship. This will hopefully inform leadership and staff development programmes and initiate contributions from others to the science of student support.

Here lies our future sustainable practice – innovating for students, with students and others who are passionate about the benefits of higher education.

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