**‘Info skills’ at the University of East London**

***Abstract:***

*In July 2011 we received the UC&R Innovation Award for our Info skills project and proposal to host a one day conference on innovative approaches to information skills training. This article briefly outlines the background to the project, explains how our online resource was developed and summarises our plans for the conference in January 2012.*

In May 2010 Library and Learning Services were awarded funding by UEL’s Director of Academic Practice & Student Experience to develop an online resource to support students in the development of information skills. The main inspiration for our approach was UEL’s Get that Job, an open access resource which used a range of media to support students in applying for and successfully getting a job at the end of their studies. We had also been very impressed with Staffordshire University’s ASK (Assignment Survival Kit) which places information skills within the context of successfully completing assignments and achieving good results.

Whilst the tailored, face to face information skills sessions delivered by our Subject Librarians had proved very successful with students, we had for some time been dissatisfied with the proliferation of printed guides and text heavy web pages we were relying on to support learners outside these sessions. These were underused and it certainly appeared that they were not attractive to students. It was time to provide something more accessible and flexible that would enable our students to learn independently as well as in the classroom. The increasing proportion of distance and work based learners, as well as those who prefer to learn online, was a further pressure to develop a different kind of learning tool that was directly relevant to student needs and appealed to a wide range of learning styles.

We are very fortunate that within UEL we have some professional expertise in both learning design and learning technology, and two colleagues from UEL connect (the university’s e learning team) were able to help us realise our vision of an interactive online tool that really appeals to learners. The project team also included our Academic Services and Skills Manager and a Subject Librarian.

Our main focus was on level one students and the transition from school or college to higher education. We were very aware that many students come to university with limited information literacy skills and without a clear idea of expectations regarding referencing or academic writing, and certainly limited experience of using and evaluating the vast array of online and print resources provided by a large academic library service. It was clear to us that we needed to help students not only to access and use our resources but also to understand why acquiring information skills is vital to academic success – that it is not just about using the library effectively but also about developing critical thinking skills when selecting resources and developing referencing skills to avoid plagiarism.

Given the strong emphasis within the university on providing an outstanding student experience, and our own service’s aspirations to develop a strong partnership with our students, it was very important to us to include the student voice in this resource. We also wanted to gather a good proportion of input from academic staff to reinforce the message that developing information skills is an integral part of learning at undergraduate level.

One of the key drivers in developing Info skills was the need to provide learning support via a choice of media. We were also clear that the resource needed to be structured in a way that allowed progression but also ‘dipping in’, so we wanted content and learning objects to sit within the tool but also to be used independently - e.g. videos which could be used by subject librarians within their own tailored training sessions or by academic staff teaching on the compulsory level one skills module.

An additional consideration was the continuing growth of partnerships, both locally and globally, to deliver UEL courses. The ability to access, via the web, an open educational resource like this would be invaluable to partner institutions as well as to ‘pre entry’ students, enabling them to begin developing the skills they would need at university.

From the start it was very important to us that the tool was ‘owned’ by our subject librarians who deliver information literacy training across the university. Without their ‘buy in’ this resource might prove a very expensive white elephant, and we recognised that we would rely heavily on subject librarians to work within the academic schools to promote it. Our vision was to develop a more ‘joined up’ approach to learning support and training, providing accessible content online to enhance the face to face learning that continues via information skills sessions. Subject Librarians provided all the content and with the help of our professional learning designer and learning technologist to build a structure and to advise on appropriate media we were able to develop a really student focused resource. We also embedded our online chat service ‘Ask a Librarian’ within Info skills to facilitate on the spot help for students who need a more personal touch.

In getting students involved we provided incentives (vouchers) to encourage learners from a range of backgrounds to be filmed talking about their experience of an aspect of information skills - for example, how using the library had helped them get better grades or how they had learned from previous mistakes in referencing. We also filmed staff (without incentives!) talking about the importance of information skills in academic learning, as we felt a combination of ‘personal experience’ from students, more authoritative comments from lecturers and expert advice from subject librarians would produce the most effective tool. There was also a very inspirational video from one of the UEL Student Liaison Officers on making the transition to Higher Education and the importance of making the most of the libraries as part of the whole experience of higher education and personal development.

During the course of the project we held focus groups to review the content and structure as it was under development and feedback from students told us they liked the videos, that they wanted information on all aspects of information skills under a variety of media - video, printable guides, online demos, - which we were able to provide. They also enjoyed the’ test yourself’ quizzes which we included, specifically around referencing and plagiarism.

Currently we are evaluating Info skills with a view to improving and enhancing it for next academic year. Hits on our site are increasing and we have received lots of wonderful comments about it – it was even promoted by our VC at his start of year address for staff. More recently members of academic staff have approached us about using Info skills within their own assessed modules.

In January 2013, thanks to the UC&R Innovation Award, we are hosting a one day conference called ‘Going it alone’. We will present Info skills and some of the findings from our evaluation exercise as part of the programme and we expect to have some interesting results to share with delegates. We are very fortunate to have Andrew Walsh from the University of Huddersfield, a well known innovator in library services, as a keynote speaker. Having attended a workshop at the UC & R conference in Exeter last year, where Andrew gave a really insightful presentation, a colleague recommended him to us. After a little research we discovered Andrew was working on an innovative project to develop a library information skills game which we felt was exactly the kind of project colleagues would like to hear more about.

Our conference planning team has been hard at work organising a programme that includes a number of speakers, ‘hands on’ opportunities to use Info skills and, hopefully, the chance to gather some more invaluable feedback on how we might improve or develop this resource. There has been much discussion around the form the event should take, whether to have a whole day or half day and who would be appropriate keynote speakers, bearing in mind we want look at other innovative approaches to information literacy as well as promoting our own Info skills resource. Suitable timing for this event was also a consideration, knowing how busy colleagues in academic libraries are throughout the year, and in the end the best date was thought to be before the start of our semester B in January which, unluckily, left Friday 13th as our only option…..!

The main theme of the conference will be innovations in information literacy and the day will include an in depth look at Info skills with input from UEL subject librarians. The morning keynote address will be delivered by Erica Plowman, a UEL Connect colleague and learning designer who interpreted our ideas and translated them into a coherent whole. Bookings opened on the 7th November 2011 and already we are receiving lots of interest from colleagues across both the higher education and further education sectors. We will be reporting back on the conference outcomes in the new year.

<http://www.uel.ac.uk/infoskills>

<http://employability.uelconnect.org.uk/>

<http://www.staffs.ac.uk/ask/>

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