Engaging the disengaged – indefinitely: creating a sustainable model for student library ambassadors

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Abstract
The key aim of this project is to create a sustainable and transferable model to recruit and motivate student library ambassadors on a no-cost or low-cost basis. The role of the student ambassadors is to drive change and promote better engagement with university libraries. The model is being tested at the universities of Loughborough and Nottingham. This case study reports on a project that is two-thirds complete and is currently on-going.

Keywords: sustainability, engagement, peer-to-peer, university support services, libraries

Background
A successful internally funded project at Loughborough University Library in 2010/11 employed four student ambassadors; one each for the faculties of engineering and science and two for the larger social sciences and humanities faculty. The ambassadors, paid at student rates, were asked to solicit feedback from their peers on library-related issues and to respond with a creative marketing campaign that would appeal to students. Three of the four ambassadors were final year students and as such there was a noticeable drop in commitment from the beginning of the spring term. In the absence of continued project funding the challenge was to make the initiative sustainable.

The current project (2011/12) focuses on STEM students at Loughborough and Nottingham. Two students have been recruited at each institution to promote the respective library services and other learning resources. An industrial sponsor, Jaguar Land Rover, is providing a performance-related remuneration package in lieu of a salary. Ideally, the current students would play a part in recruiting their successors in time for a managed hand-over before the end of the academic year. It is expected that the student ambassadors will reinforce the following skills during this project: time management, interpersonal skills, communication skills, leadership and influencing skills.

Rationale
A number of issues arose from the original project in 2010/11, namely:

- how to recruit students on a no-cost or low-cost basis (sustainability)
- how to improve the status and visibility of the student recruits
- how to encourage students to take on this role (student engagement)
- how to motivate the student recruits throughout the academic year.

The current project has developed an approach that seeks to address each of these issues.
The approach

The approach adopted by this project relates specifically to university libraries. It could be transferred or adapted to suit other university support services (e.g. careers services).

A project officer was hired to develop a model for recruiting students on a sustainable basis. Firstly, a student focus group was held to tease out some of the issues listed in Rationale above. The following topics were covered:

- What would encourage you to become a library ambassador?
- What roles do you believe a library ambassador should undertake?
- What factors would prevent you from applying to become a library ambassador?
- What incentives would encourage you to maintain focus as a library ambassador throughout the academic year?
- What are the major limitations of the university library and how can a library ambassador overcome these?

Secondly, a review of the literature on volunteer motivation identified themes of altruism, egoism and a kind of middle ground (a mixture of altruistic and egoistic motives) which would appear to be particularly appropriate to students, especially those seeking opportunities to enhance their employability. They are also more likely to volunteer if their friends get involved (Francis, 2011). A survey of higher education institutions (HEIs) was also conducted to establish current practice in using students as ambassadors. In most schemes students are paid an hourly rate; however, one or two stood out as being different (Simon Fraser University, 2012; University of Gloucestershire, 2012), instead offering non-financial performance-related rewards. A three-tiered remuneration model based on these examples was drafted and a couple of STEM-related companies were approached to provide non-monetary remuneration and sponsorship for the scheme. One of these companies, Jaguar Land Rover (JLR), agreed to participate and a remuneration package tiered to performance was negotiated. The package includes a “uniform”, corporate “goodies”, a factory visit, training courses at JLR and a track day. The students achieve different levels of award (bronze, silver and gold) as their work progresses. The involvement of this well-known industrial sponsor is important to the project with respect to the sustainability, student engagement and status issues outlined in Rationale above.

Thirdly, a new role with a new name was developed in order to attract students. The name, which incorporated the name of the sponsor, became JLR Learning Resource Leader (LRL). The student recruits are encouraged to drive change at each institution for the benefit of STEM students; however, it was understood that any benefit accruing to this group may also be of use to the wider student body. The changes investigated by the LRLs should be related to learning resources/libraries. Since the current project spans two HEIs, the actual "job duties" are negotiated between the LRLs and the university libraries concerned. There are, however, a number of LRL activities common to both Loughborough and Nottingham:

- Establishing a public channel of communication (e.g. a blog)
- Identifying desired objectives (e.g. specific issues) and investigating means to bring them about
- Promoting the role of the LRL
- Involvement with recruiting successors
- Collaboration with the LRLs at the other institution.

The LRLs are managed by a member of library staff at each institution.

The traditional method for hiring students for paid work at Loughborough and Nottingham is via standard application form and individual interview. For the new LRL position, this project explored different approaches to student recruitment.

At Loughborough, STEM students in their penultimate year of study were invited by email to apply. As mentioned in Background, experience from the original project (where three of the four library ambassadors were final year students) showed that there was a noticeable drop in commitment
from the beginning of the spring term. Targeting students who were neither freshers nor finalists was therefore important. A second email was sent to interested respondents, including instructions to prepare a 2½ minute oral presentation on a given topic. The presentations were delivered without visual aids in front of the other candidates, after which a series of round-table discussions on topics of interest to the library involved all of the candidates.

At Nottingham, an email was sent from the library (via school managers) inviting applications from all undergraduates in science and engineering. A second email was sent to interested respondents, including instructions to provide a 60 second “elevator pitch” on one aspect that they would change about the library. The elevator pitch was followed up with standard interview questions; each candidate was interviewed individually.

The four students appointed at Nottingham and Loughborough represent the departments of Chemistry, Mechanical Engineering and Mathematics. They are engaged for the entire academic year, during which time it is expected that they will achieve each level in turn. The levels (bronze, silver and gold) each represent roughly a term’s commitment. The LRLs at both institutions have identified mini projects and activities on which to focus during each term. Additional activities have been suggested by library staff as required.

**Evaluation**

The project planned evaluation at three levels:

- performance against project objectives
- impact on key stakeholders
- synthesis of learning and recommendations.

As the activities of the LRLs are not yet finished, the evaluation is incomplete. The results of the funded work to date are presented below.

The project objectives and the degree to which they have been met are as follows:

**Develop a transferable and sustainable model for recruiting and incentivising low-cost, sponsored or volunteer student library ambassadors**

The model is in its first year of operation and thus it is not yet possible to evaluate the sustainability of recruiting students. However, the universities of Loughborough and Nottingham each have two students in post and it is anticipated that they will play a part in recruiting their successors.

The current incentive scheme has been negotiated with one company. It is not yet known if the company wishes to continue sponsoring the initiative. However, a similar form of sponsorship could be sought from other companies, including those outside of the STEM sector.

Since the project is on-going and the outcomes have not yet been disseminated, there is no evidence yet to indicate if this model is truly transferable to other institutions; however, every effort has been made to ensure that this is the case.

**Recruit two science and engineering student library ambassadors at each institution for Semester One 2011/12**

The role aroused interest in the target student groups, despite the fact that it was not closely defined. The affiliation of the corporate sponsor no doubt piqued curiosity. Enabling students to fashion a role is a nice idea in theory, but many students require much closer direction. Indeed, there was a significant drop-out rate in applications at both institutions. The emails attracted 23 and 22 respondents at Loughborough and Nottingham respectively. These figures whittled down to nine at Loughborough and four at Nottingham indicating that they would attend for interview. On the day, five students at Loughborough and two at Nottingham were present. It is interesting to note, however, that one of the unsuccessful Loughborough candidates requested
feedback on his performance and there are indications that he would consider applying again in the future.

**Allow the ambassadors to be agents of change within HEI libraries and develop innovative ways to engage their peers in library use**

The LRLs have been enabled to drive change and investigate improvements to learning resources and facilities. The choice of improvements/investigations has been led by the LRLs, and some improvements have been easier to realise than others. At Loughborough, many of the improvements have involved liaising with departments external to the library, with mixed success and challenges to motivation. At Nottingham, discussions on how to improve student feedback mechanisms within the library are in progress. The LRLs have also sent out a short survey to gather data on library use as well as promoting some library services that are not generally well known to the students.

Whilst the Loughborough-based LRLs have been traditional in their approaches to engaging their peers (e.g. using plasma screen presentations and speaking with individuals), the Nottingham-based LRLs have experimented with eye-catching games for their roaming *Promoting the Library* stand. This includes a giant Jenga game where a student answering a library question gets to remove bricks. The aim of the game is to draw students to the stand and to help them learn some key library facts in a fun way (Figure 1).

![Figure 1. Nottingham LRLs with stand and Jenga game](image)

The intended method of impact level evaluation was to survey the key stakeholder groups, namely students, library staff, academic staff and the LRLs themselves. To date there has been little impact evaluation as the project is not yet complete. Although library staff at both institutions have been informed about the LRLs and their activities, a quick survey revealed little actual awareness. However, it could be argued that the group that it is most important to reach is the student body. Evaluation of the LRLs’ impact on their peers is yet to be conducted.

Finally, in terms of synthesis level activities, the project team will be presenting outcomes to the wider community at the 4th International Symposium of Engineering Education (ISEE) conference in July 2012 and hopefully at the National HE STEM Programme conference in September 2012. In addition, the LRLs have successfully submitted an abstract for a poster presentation at the International Conference on Innovation, Good Practice and Research in Engineering Education (EE2012) in September 2012 and have been invited to submit a full paper.

**Discussion, summary**

Whilst the funded project period is drawing to an end, the work of the LRLs is not yet finished. However, there are already some important lessons to learn from the experience to date:

- **Model:** The three-tiered approach has proved difficult for Loughborough students who operate not in three terms but in two semesters. The first four weeks of the spring term were effectively “lost” due to the exam period. A two-tier model would be more relevant.

- **Sponsor:** Negotiations with the sponsor have been channelled through an “academic champion” - in this case, the project officer. The university libraries have been a step removed from building the relationship. Persistence is key, as arrangements (e.g. for the
printing of T-shirts) can be protracted. Convening an early meeting between the sponsor and the students is preferable so that a good rapport can be established.

- **Driving change**: Library staff and LRLs at both institutions have found this aspect of the role challenging, as change is not easy to achieve and is therefore difficult to promise, rather leaving the success of the project as a hostage to fortune.

- **LRLs**: Managing the students has been very staff-intensive and is too much for one individual. This brings into question the sustainability of this element of the model. In addition, Nottingham University Library has learned how difficult it is to reach undergraduates (i.e. the sending of recruitment emails), thus the LRLs sit very strategically between library staff and the student body.

**Further development**

Loughborough University Library’s Marketing and Publications team will take on future work with students as part of a holistic approach to student engagement. This may or may not involve a commercial sponsor.

The future at Nottingham is likely to involve students in a well-defined promotional capacity. There are no funds to pay students, thus working with an industrial sponsor is key. Steering group members are keen to see the project continue.

**References**


**Further reading/bibliography**


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