
Librarians let loose!

An experience of roving at the University of East Anglia

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INTRODUCTION

The idea of the 'roving librarian' has appeared in several forms across the literature and is certainly not a new concept. Roving within the library can allow librarians to move more freely around the library building itself in order to approach users directly and provide a more proactive and robust enquiry service.¹ In recent years roving has been used as an outreach and marketing tool where librarians have set up reference desks in other buildings in the university² or have used new tablet technologies to approach students in social and meeting spaces.³

At the University of East Anglia (UEA) we decided we wanted to pursue the opportunity to engage with our students outside the library building, and roving seemed a good way to do this. The UEA has four teaching faculties, spread across campus in various buildings. In particular, the nursing students are based in the Edith Cavell building next to the hospital and a twenty-minute walk from the library. The campus has one library building that caters for all students and subject areas. There are five faculty librarians based in the library who act the main point of liaison between the library and faculty, providing induction and teaching sessions and managing the faculty collections. In addition we have an information skills librarian to provide more generic teaching sessions, share the teaching of the faculty librarians and create learning objects to help students use the library.

DEVELOPING THE PROJECT CONCEPT

In 2012 the information skills librarian, Jane Helgesen, and I decided we wanted to develop a roving programme that would initially be run as a pilot by us, and if successful could then be grown to include the participation of all the faculty librarians. We had recently purchased an

iPad for faculty librarian use, but the tablet was not in itself the driver for our roving programme. Our primary objective was to reach out to those students who may need help, or have questions, but who may not have approached library staff to get answers or did not have time to attend library workshops, or indeed get to the library building at all. We also wanted to use roving to promote the library and in particular the faculty librarians who can provide more in-depth subject help to users.

Looking at the work Huddersfield had done on their roving librarian concept⁴ we realised we needed a visual brand for our programme to make it clear and memorable to students and to catch their attention. 'Librarians Let Loose!' was born from the desire to keep the word librarian (as we felt this indicated who were most clearly) but also inject a sense of fun and emphasise the fact that the library service was not confined to just one building.



Fig. 1 Logo used to brand the UEA roving programme

We selected three or four half-hour slots per week, usually around lunchtime or sometimes mid-afternoon and chose which location we would be visiting for each. We took a bit of a scattergun approach to this in order to ascertain which slots would be. We advertised the sessions in advance via a dedicated web page (with the rather cheeky url 'www.uea.ac.uk/is/looselibrarians') and information screens in the library. An email was also sent out to academic staff to make them aware of the programme and ask them to encourage students to approach us with questions should they have any. That said, the idea of 'Librarians let loose' was not just to catch students with questions, but staff too. We were well aware that academic staff may also choose not to approach the library questions, and we wanted to give them a chance to approach us outside the library if they wanted to.

We decided to run the first set of sessions for four weeks as a trial toward the end of the spring semester 2013, hoping to reach students already hard at work and therefore using the library. The locations we had chosen included the Edith Cavell building as it was so far away, but also the main café in the student union building, the café in the biosciences building, as well as some of the hubs, which at UEA are administrative centres for each faculty. We tried to rove in pairs, which helped raise our confidence levels and promoted a more collaborative feel to the project, but inevitably we did have to rove by ourselves if one of us was unavailable. We created a pull-up banner to display in the location where we were roving, and also made postcards sporting the 'Librarians let loose!' logo and briefly explaining what we were up to and when. We tweeted when we were about to go out roving, and posted on the library blog.

GETTING OUT AND ABOUT

We discovered that the thirty-minute slot was pretty much perfect. This allowed time to approach everyone in an area, but if there were a large number of students it also meant we kept it short. We found that roving required quite a lot of energy! Interestingly, we found that the designed spaces where students could expect to be focused on their work – the hubs – were not really great locations for 'Librarians let loose'. Students were usually there for a particular reason, such as asking a question or collecting work, and so were less open to interruption from a helpful-looking librarian. Conversely, cafés where we could reasonably expect students not to want to talk about work at all had fantastic results, with many students happy to give positive feedback about the library, or even launch into a series of ideas for improving the service.

Overwhelmingly, the response to our presence was positive, with only a few people who (politely) asked us to move on. It must be noted, however, that all interaction with students was prompted by us going up to them, explaining who we were and why we were there, and asking if they had a question. No one came up to approach us. It was therefore very handy to have a postcard to distribute, to show students what we were trying to do, and to give them the option of contacting us at a later date if preferred. It was also useful when two of us were in a café to see which tables had a postcard already, so we did not bother students who had already been approached.

This issue of whether to approach students or not appears to have been a key element of the success of this project. In Huddersfield's case⁵ staff participating in the roving programme showed varying degrees of comfort with the idea of approaching students directly, although they reported that use of freebies, and their opening line of 'Do you use Summon?' helped to initiate conversation. However, it was clear to us that without our being proactive and approaching people, the students would not themselves choose to engage with us. Without having a discovery service to promote, our opening line was the more banal 'Does the library meet your needs?' It seemed very effective at quickly engaging students in a discussion about the library resources. Fortunately all the faculty librarians at UEA feel that to approach students to ask them questions directly, while initially daunting, is the best way to initiate interaction and help students at point of need.

STUDENT RESPONSES

Initially we had hoped to gain feedback about the programme through a one-minute survey-monkey questionnaire we had ready for students to answer on an iPad. As it happened, neither of us felt it was easy to ask students to evaluate their interaction with us immediately after they had spoken to us, and especially when the iPad needed to be handed back straight anyway; so even if we were not looking over their shoulder, we were 'hovering', and making the promise of an anonymously recorded response a little hard to maintain. We were also speaking to many people, some for only a couple of minutes and often in large groups, which also made it harder to request feedback in this way.

We therefore decided to keep a tally of the questions we were asked. This would enable us to group the issues students raised, and consequently identify the main areas where the library needed to improve. One aspect we perhaps had not expected was that we would have so much positive feedback from students.

Of the 286 comments made, 140 were positive, which was extremely encouraging. Of the comments designated 'negative', the main problems mentioned were to do with the physical library space, rather than the online resources, which took us by surprise as we were expecting most students to talk to us about issues of accessing full text. It was clear that the students' concept of the library primarily concerned the physical building, being able to plug their laptop in anywhere

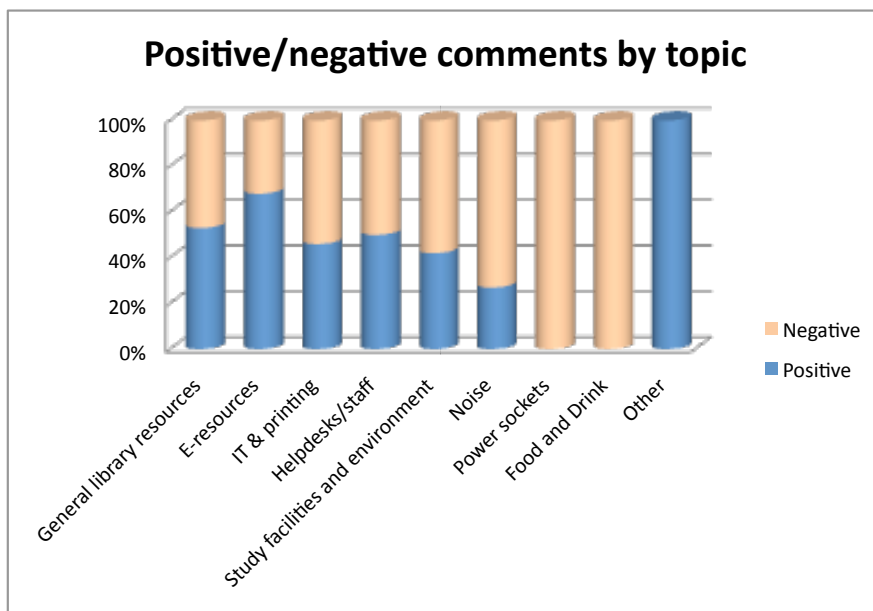


Fig. 2 Topics that students commented on

they chose and being able to eat and drink while working. This may have been because we asked them about their experience of the library, and to students, the word 'library' primarily means the physical building, not the myriad online resources they have access to through the work of the library.

Students also talked to us about issues they had with loan times, renewals, number of books and fines. However, they were also quick to offer unsolicited praise regarding the library provision, prompt response to queries and requests, and the proactive approach the library takes to responding to student concerns.

Of course, for issues regarding individual students' accounts or the physical library space we were only able to note the students' concerns and pass on as feedback. With queries regarding how to search, journal provision and referencing we could help students straightaway. However, although we took both a laptop and iPad with us we never used the laptop, and rarely used the iPad. This was because students usually had their own computer with them and we could use that, or because they were happy just to talk about an issue and did not require a demonstration. This really shows that, even without the technology, just reaching out to students to talk to them can raise the profile of the library and increase student confidence in the library provision.

Being able to help students straightaway was one of the more rewarding aspects of being part of the project. Students were pleased to learn about the inter-lending service, to receive searching tips

for use in our discovery service / databases, how to request books and even how to sync their Endnote libraries. The students who engaged with us were primarily undergraduates, but we did also speak with postgraduate taught and research students. Staff seemed less willing to engage with us on the rare occasions that we encountered them, although we still gave them a postcard and encouraged them to get in touch if they had a query.

Unfortunately, as we were

collecting feedback by making notes on students' comments, we did not have a formal mechanism for noting student types, so this element is not reflected in our data and can only be reported anecdotally.

NEXT STEPS

On the basis of the data collected and also the positive experience of the librarians who participated in the pilot scheme we deemed 'Librarians let loose' to have been a very successful programme. We wanted to be able to run it again in November 2013, when students would be working on their first assignments. We planned to follow the same format as before, but focus more on the social areas across campus where we had significant success and also involve all the faculty librarians who could choose to target the buildings where their particular students were based, thus enabling the subject-specific expertise that can be offered through roving. However, staffing changes meant that we were unable to run the programme in the autumn.

Nevertheless, our enterprising health librarian, William Jones, and newly appointed information skills librarian, Emma Coonan, took the initiative to rove again in February / March 2014. They were specifically targeting the more remote Edith Cavell building in order to provide viable library outreach for these very busy nursing students. Three lunchtime slots were selected after liaison with the nursing school about the best periods to visit based on when the most teaching would be taking place. The school also advertised the sessions in advance on their digital screens in the building. William and Emma found that two

sessions worked well, but three was perhaps a little too much. The sessions proved effective at engaging with both students and with staff as well. As before, the tablet was useful but not necessary – generally students wanted to talk about their experiences of the library building and how to improve the service. For these students, geographically separated from the main library building and often on placement, managing their loans and renewals was the chief priority. Therefore the roving programme garnered useful suggestions for service improvement in these areas, but we were also happy to find that the majority of responses from these students (14 out of 23) were positive feedback.

THE FUTURE

'Librarians let loose' now exists at UEA as a brand and remains a tool that we can easily use again. Indeed, we are shortly to launch a new discovery service, so we are likely to re-launch the programme to help promote the use of our new search tool, and troubleshoot student issues as and when they arise.

REFERENCES

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