Northumbria Research Link

Supporting learning beyond the classroom: developing the Northumbria Learner Support Model.

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Abstract

Academic Libraries traditionally offered support for a variety of information related queries. As the storage and delivery of information changed, libraries increasingly became involved in supporting students to use the new technologies and the widening focus of Higher Education to encompass the development of skills for life, added another new dimension. It was no longer enough simply to provide students with an answer but rather to support them to develop the skills to enable them to find answers themselves. The impact of the widening participation agenda meant that different levels and methods of support were required as standard and often over a 24x7 period. The deficit support model began to give way to a more holistic, collaborative view of student support within libraries and learning styles/ help seeking behaviours began to be taken into account (Weaver 2008).

The 'Learner Support Model' was introduced by Library and Learning Services in 2004/5 as part of an overall strategy to enhance student learning, retention, performance and achievement. All students do not automatically have effective research, IT or study skills but those who do develop those skills will make increased use of high quality information sources, are liable to return better academic performances and are therefore more likely to complete their programmes.

The generic nature of the support model ensures that students can access support wherever they are; in whatever discipline area they are working and at whatever time they need it. In the four years since the model was implemented it has moved from a theoretical ideal to a well subscribed support service handling around 90,000 enquiries per year.

The Learner Support Model has been showcased at conferences, evaluated through feedback and now developed to a position where it can be extended to other services and student facing academic support areas of Northumbria University and beyond.

Introduction

The 'Learner Support Model' was developed alongside other major changes within the Library environment including physical and technological developments. Space for group working was provided with wireless technology, SMARTboards and facilities to practice presentations to encourage collaborative working. The new spaces and technologies within the Library required a different form of support to that provided by the traditional enquiry desk. Students often did not want to physically come to the desk itself but preferred to email or access online support. They developed the skills to use the new technologies through a mix of peer support, experimentation and access to support material provided by the Library.

Background to the model

With over 31,000 students who might potentially need support from Library and Learning Services was essential that more than one avenue of assistance was provided and that student expectation was managed. Full time, part-time and distance learning students should be guaranteed an equitable experience wherever possible during their time at Northumbria.

The model was designed to formalise the existing Library enquiry process but also to add on more routes to and methods of support. The model focuses on the individual or group of individuals rather than the service itself. Library and Learning Services have moved from an enquiry service where questions were answered to a model which supports students as they develop their learning potential.

The Learner Support Model

Figure 1: The Learner Support Model
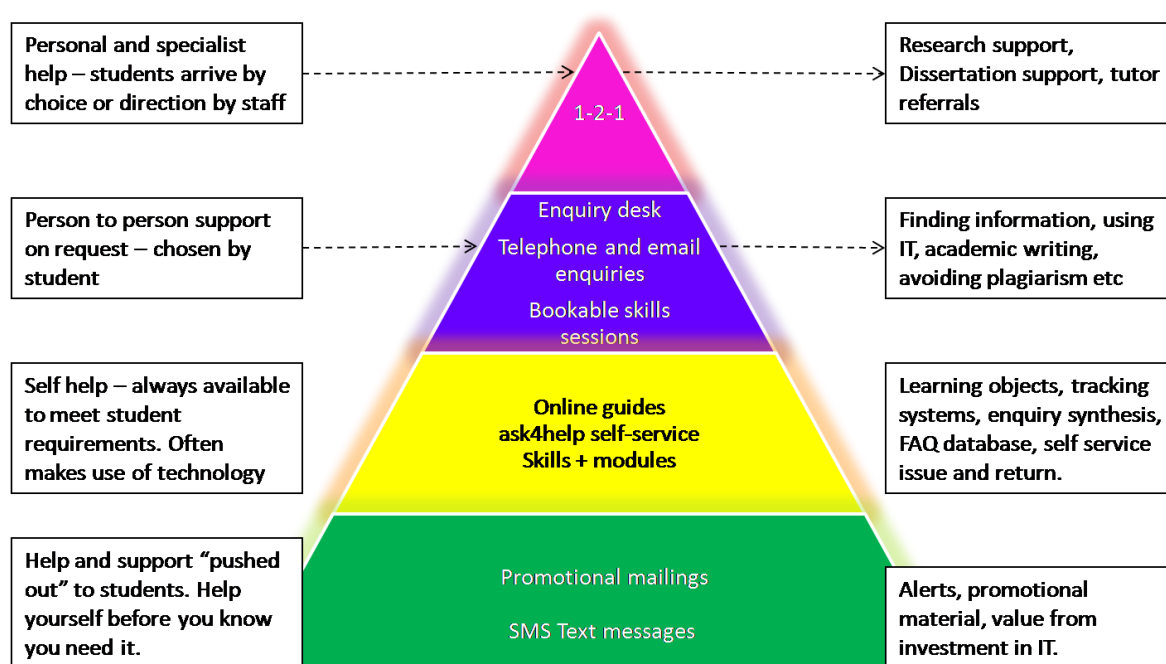
Modus operandi

The Learner Support Model utilises a triage system to ensure that the support given matches with the need of the student. The different levels of the model encompass push support where students are targeted with information before they are aware that they need it; self-access support where they can select help guides or use completely automated systems; person to person support which can be face to face or telephone and can be to large/small groups or individually at an enquiry point, finally the highest level of support is provided in a one to one tutorial-type setting. The student often makes the initial choice as to where in the model they enter but once in they are directed by technology and/or staff to reach their correct level. Ideally a student who wanted to know how to find basic information for an

essay or how to paginate their Word document would be given help guides and shown basic techniques at an enquiry point, by telephone or email and not referred for a one to one tutorial session.

Library and Learning Services makes use of specialist software, Supportworks Enterprise Support Platform (Hornbill Systems, 2007), to track student progress and to maintain accurate records of the type, location and subject of enquiries received. An individual student's progress through the support system is recorded with details of the specific enquiry and intervention offered. Students who require a high touch support can be identified and referred seamlessly to specialist staff and at the same time common queries can easily be identified and added to published Frequently Asked Questions, help sheets and even incorporated into induction and skills training sessions.

With a physical presence in five locations over a wide range of opening hours plus email and telephone contact available 24x7 students can be sure that they can access the support model whenever they need to.

The Student Journey

The student journey may touch the model in several places, as they can be referred into the triage system at any level. The diagram below highlights the staffed services involved.

Figure 2: The Student Journey
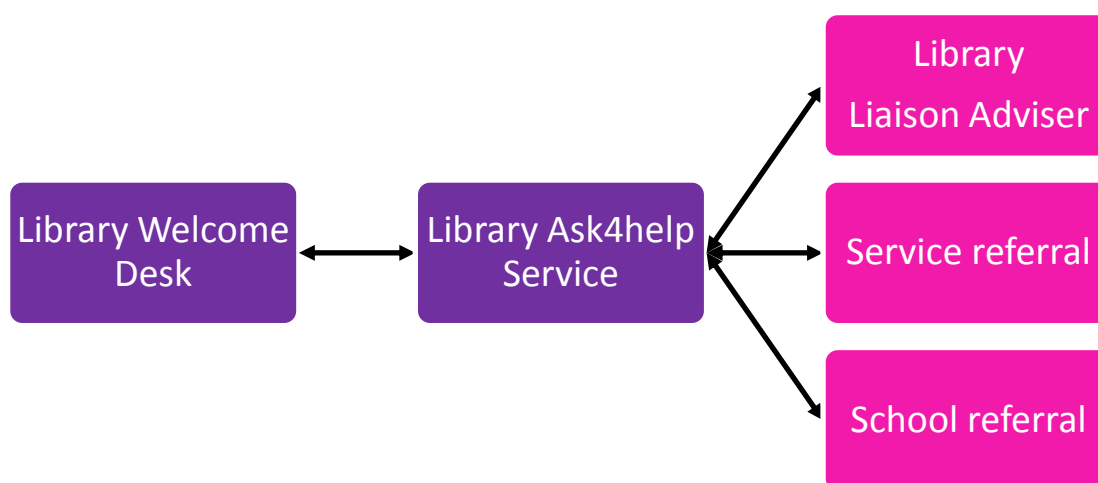
Welcome Desk

The Welcome Desks at our two campus libraries, replace the more traditional security presence. During 24x7 operation the Welcome Desk provides a single contact point dealing with face to face and telephone enquiries, answering basic questions and facilitating referral to other teams or service areas as appropriate.

Ask4help Service

This service delivers front line student assistance, face to face, by telephone and email. The staff also design and deliver training and induction sessions. The linking of practical student support with tailored induction and training sessions has greatly strengthened the overall model with students being told from the start how they can access the range of support on offer. As well as enquiry desks where students can seek support within library buildings, ask4help offers a roving service which can answer queries wherever the students are working. The service can deal with enquiries in any subject discipline, IT and study skills queries using a clearly defined referral process where a higher level of support is required. Online and hard copy help sheets are provided as an alternative or supplement to face to face support. As well as providing a support in different formats, these ensure that students can access some form of help on and off campus 24x7.

Library Liaison Advisers

Library Liaison Advisers provide specialised and targeted support for students where required. They also deliver advanced skills and higher level teaching sessions for dissertation and postgraduate students. Information Specialists offer one-to–one tutorial type support and provide the liaison link to schools and programmes, ensuring stock and services are effectively targeted to the academic programmes.

Service / School Referral

Although the student may enter the model within the Library it may be more appropriate for their support to be provided by their academic tutor, guidance tutor or school office. They may require specialist support from Student Services or need high level technical assistance from the IT Helpline. The model aims to ensure that it can link to support models in other areas of the University.

Initial evidence for the take up of the Learner Support Model

Over the past 3 years the number of enquiries handled by Library and Learning Services has grown by 125% which can reasonably be seen as an indication that students are finding it easier to access help and support, especially when combined with provision of 24x7 support from October 2008. The number of tailored skills workshops has risen by 47% allowing larger groups of students to be reached where there is a generic requirement. One to one tutorial type sessions are still offered but now tend to be for those who truly do require this level of support.

Library and Learning Services have also achieved consistently high levels of satisfaction in both internal user satisfaction surveys and wider surveys such as the National Student Survey, Your View Counts and the International Student Barometer (Table 1).

Table 1: Levels of satisfaction

Indicator	Area of satisfaction	Ranking
International Student Barometer 2008	All learning experiences	Highest level
Your View Counts (Northumbria internal satisfaction survey Spring 2007)	Overall satisfaction	95%
	Helpfulness of staff	91%
Library User Satisfaction Survey 2009	Overall satisfaction	95%
National Student Survey 2009	Library	$^{23}/_{137}$
Times Higher Education student experience survey 2009	Library	$^{16}/_{104}$

Feedback

The Learner Support Model continues to evolve in the light of improved student feedback, ongoing research and evaluation. Little large scale evaluation has been completed as yet but evidence from student focus groups and the annual Library User Satisfaction Survey suggests that students do appreciate the range of support on offer (Table 2)

Table 2: Student satisfaction - longitudinal comparisons 2005-2009

Service satisfaction %	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	Differential 2005/9
Helpfulness of library staff	80	86	88	86	88	+8
Expertise of library staff	76	82	83	83	87	+11

Since the introduction of the learner support model in 2005 the Library has seen a steady rise in student satisfaction in the helpfulness and expertise of Library staff, the two main ways in which the success of the model can be measured (Table 3).

Table 3: Examples of qualitative comments received from students

Comment	Source
Staff are always friendly, approachable, and respond to queries almost instantly. Responses to queries (e.g. via ask4help) are always thorough and helpful - keep up the great work!	Student comment -emailed November 2009
The service that I have received has been excellent and has really enabled me to get on with my assignments without taking time to come over to the library.	Student comment -emailed May 2008
It's a really good idea.	Student feedback to presentation of Learner Support Model (Northumbria Conference 2008)

| Comment	Source
It's very important to help the students as much as possible.	As above.
I think it's brilliant.	As above.

Potential for growth and future application

The learner support model itself has been developed over the last five years through several conference papers, including collecting student feedback via an informal dragon's den style presentation, encouraging delegates from across the library and IT sectors to articulate their own institutional model and exploring how the model can be applied to the specific needs of researchers.

From September 2008 Library and Learning Services successfully integrated the provision of study skills support from Student Services using the learner support model. Previously study skills support had been provided primarily via one to one sessions but by moving it into the model framework more group sessions were made available both to specific cohorts and via the Northumbria Skills Programme. Students were also directed to self-help material where appropriate, all of which resulted in a drop in the number of one to one tutorial sessions required.

Possible future linkages in the referral process may be with the Students Union, further work with Student Services and the University guidance tutor system. It is intended to evaluate the potential to apply the model to service departments and academic schools with each one having their own version of the pyramid model with clear linkages being visible between each "layer". Once other service departments and schools have adapted the model to fit their own structure it will be possible to more fully expand this ubiquitous support model in terms of scaling up, extending and providing quality support for the student journey.

There is enormous potential to develop the synergies between the versions of the model operated by schools and services. Lines of communication can be established between the various layers of the model. The idea of super-convergence (Melling and Selby, 2009) draws further upon these synergies, placing them before a wider audience. Included in the variety of services which could be considered for super convergence were student support services, academic skills, libraries and student administrative support. Delegates at this conference session discussed the potential for joining services together based on levels of support and methods of accessing support, in the same way as Library and Learning Services would wish to work with schools and services within Northumbria University (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Example of linking models
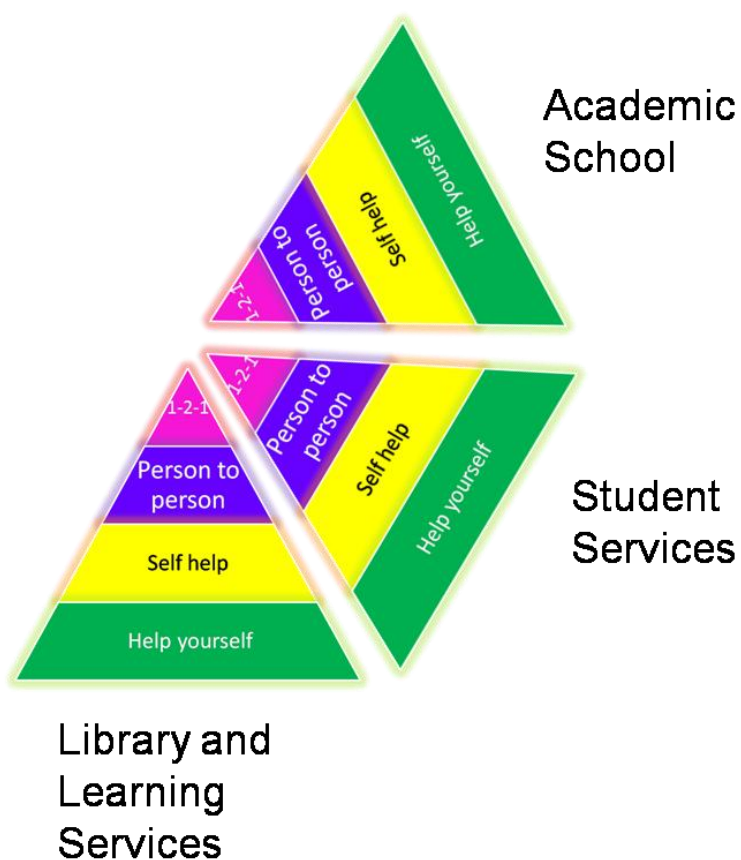
In a recent keynote address (Core, 2010) on the future of academic libraries, the drivers for change in the Higher Education sector, including 24x7, technology mediated services were discussed in conjunction with increasing student expectations. The learner support model must continue to develop to meet those expectations, frequently emerging as the thinking behind a "one stop shop" approach to student support.

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