Northumbria Research Link

Access to Services for Students –

supporting student learning

Dilys Young and **Professor Jane Core** report on how Northumbria University is joining up frontline enquiry services in the University Library and Student Support & Wellbeing Services. This superconvergence project will triage enquiries into a range of specialist advice, guidance and welfare services.
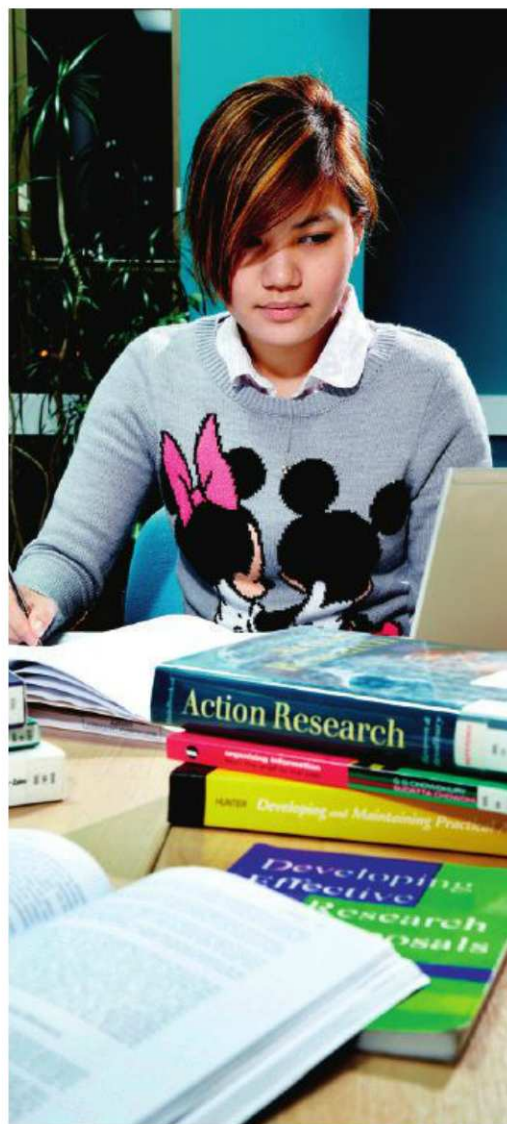
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NORTHUMBRIA University Library has a track record of designing and delivering flexible learning spaces to meet the changing needs of learners. In a major programme of refurbishment between 2003 and 2006, the university invested £6 million to develop the City Campus library, in response to student feedback.[1] The development included enhanced, technology-rich individual, group and social learning spaces that put the library at the heart of the student learning experience. This was complemented by a learner support model to ensure students receive the help they need at the appropriate level to help them in their learning journey. This includes a range of 24/7 services which enable students to access help and support via a welcome desk service, with referrals to more specialist help. These physical developments sat alongside the move from print to e-resources, delivering a hybrid resources environment within a hybrid learning space.[2]

The library is now part of a new Academic Services department, comprising Academic Registry (Student & Programme Administration and Quality Support & Collaborative Ventures) and Student Support and Wellbeing. Services were dispersed across six centres and each service area (Library, Student Support and Wellbeing and Careers and Employment) had its own frontline and administrative support systems for access to services. More specialist staff were available through a triage system which referred enquiries to the most appropriately experienced colleague for resolution, again each within separate arms of the service.

Initiative driven by restructure

The Access to Services for Students initiative was therefore driven by a restructure, with the Director of Library and Learning Services becoming Director of Academic Services and University Librarian. One major factor was leadership across front facing services, in which the library was seen to be leading and delivering best practice – as evidenced by its recent success in achieving the Customer Service Excellence award. The Careers and Employment Service also held the Matrix accreditation. The new management

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structure therefore combined the new services with Heads of: Student and Programme Administration; Quality Support & Collaborative Ventures; Planning & Resources; Academic Library Services; Content Services and Library Systems; and Student Support & Wellbeing to form the new leadership team.[3]

Learner Support Model

The library had developed its Learner Support Model some years earlier.[4] This included a diagrammatic representation of how enquiries flowed into and through the service. Students were able to progress from 'pushed' services such as information and leaflets, through to learning materials that allowed them to 'self serve' and use the service as independent learners. The model was cumulative as students increased in confidence and experience, but it was also designed so that they could enter the model at any level and find the most appropriate support. The Learner Support Model was thus designed to connect learners to support in the most effective manner and at the most appropriate level to suit their information needs. It was underpinned by call centre logging software to ensure referrals were made seamlessly, and to avoid students having to travel between service points for enquiry resolution.

At the time of the restructure, it seemed obvious to use this systematic approach to 'join up' the new services by expanding the Learner Support Model to articulate each front facing service.

Enhancing the student journey

Northumbria's focus on delivering an excellent student experience (as evidenced in a range of objectives and plans, from the Corporate Strategy 2009-2014[5] to School and Service action plans and a Quality Improvement Framework) was a motivating factor. Data quality was also key within the new Academic Services department, as it was clear there would be new synergies to be realised in joining up data systems which had previously been dispersed between departments.

Learning and teaching enhancement was another impetus, as many of the processes involved in that area have a direct impact on the learning experience of students. For example, validations and quality assurance processes – the library was able to forge more effective links in order to articulate resource requirements for new programmes.

There was also overlap in some areas, particularly in advice services, where some additional 'join-up' might be achieved, and in skills delivery programmes which were delivered in different ways and across different topic areas in Student Support & Wellbeing and the Library. The library had incorporated study skills

into its programme of information literacy teaching two years earlier and there would now be additional opportunities for collaborative working and materials development. A shared customer service ethos was an integral part of Library and Student Support & Wellbeing services. The library offered 24/7 opening hours supported by a welcome desk service which could be enhanced to deliver routine enquiry services and an appointments system for students across the wider service portfolio, delivering added value to the university. It was important for colleagues across Academic Services to understand that we were not trying to 'fix' anything – services were not broken. Rather we were trying to improve and enhance the student journey by joining them up in a different way.

Virtual convergence

Using the Learner Support Model and the Student Support and Wellbeing's triage and support models also gave us the opportunity to join services virtually, as initially we did not have the space to co-locate services within a single building. This would come later (we hoped) and gave us the interim opportunity to investigate and articulate the range of services which we wanted to converge, including working with students to understand how they used them and identifying what they needed most. We had already done work on customer journey mapping in preparation for Customer Service Excellence, so we had a number of techniques with which to explore this exciting opportunity.

Staff challenges and development

A building refurbishment project at our Coach Lane Campus Library in 2011 gave us the impetus to start working towards this, and would be used as a pilot project for a fuller rollout of the new services model in 2012. We were therefore faced with a situation where an interim arrangement for converging front-facing student services was needed prior to being able to fully articulate service needs. This was difficult for the front-line staff, who were concerned that the service would lack continuity, but wanted to be able to maintain existing services whilst things around them were changing. Managers agreed that dealing with ambiguity is often an issue and worked through a number of techniques to support staff. These included using a 'World Café' as a platform for staff to bring up ideas, opportunities and issues; a range of feedback and communication methods to identify the core services of importance to students; reviewing the customer journeys through existing services, as well as developing new journeys for the broader services.

An integral part of this was the Library's Staff Development Framework, which identifies delivering excellent customer service as a key component of every job.
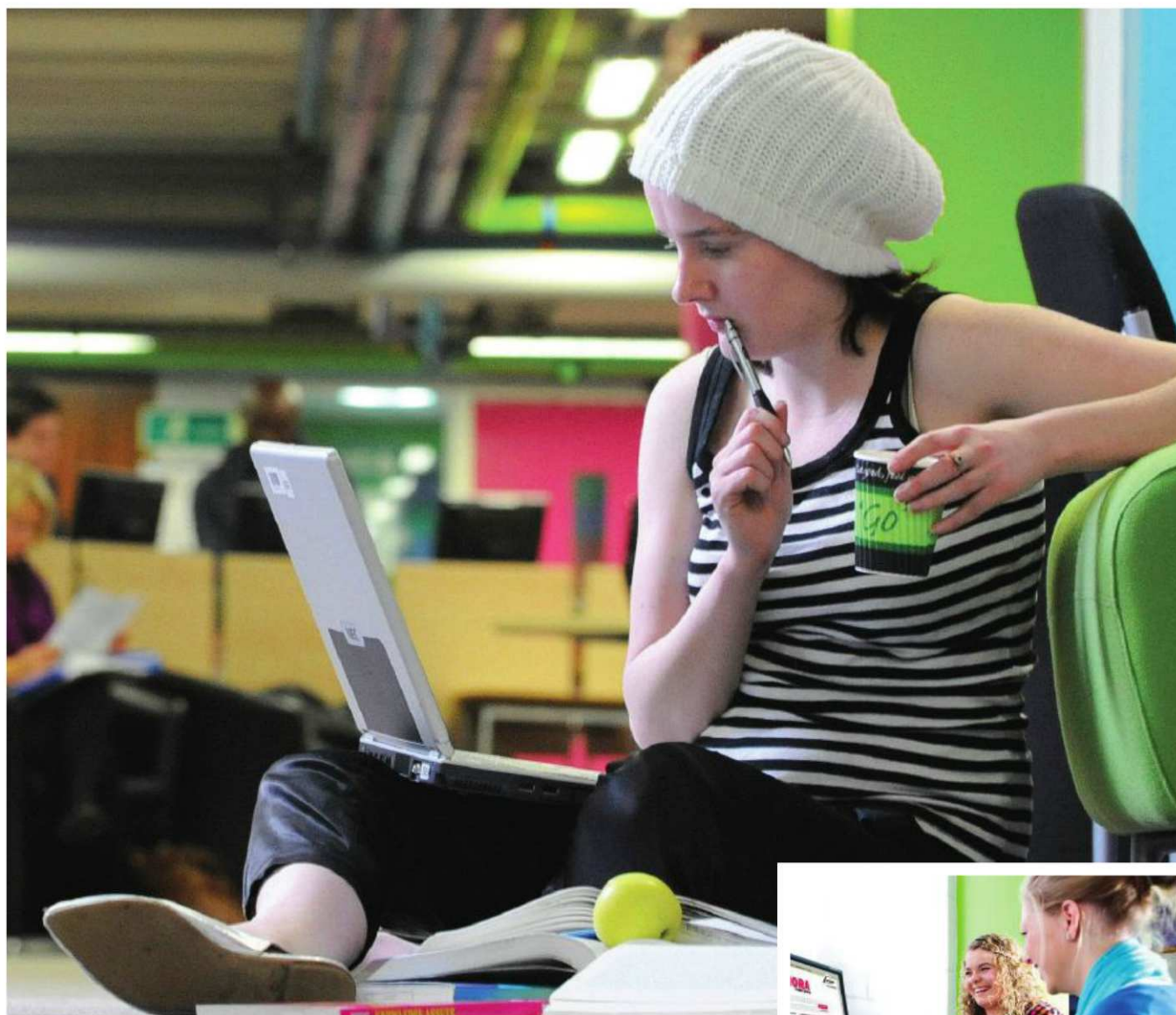
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This will be used over time to extend the competencies to other parts of the service, as will our commitment to putting students at the heart of what we do. Another building block in this is our Welcome Host and Welcome All training programme, which will be rolled out across the wider front-facing services, with new trainers coming from other parts of the service to act as champions for change and advocates for delivering consistently high quality services and continuity.

Delivering benefits

The project has delivered many benefits, including simpler access across a wider range of services and a more seamless approach to service delivery. The student learning journey is more effective and a higher percentage of enquiry resolution is provided at the first point of contact, as well as more effective triaging of enquiries to ensure students get to the appropriate level within the

References

1 Willoughby, C and Kilner, A. Planning & Designing Technology-Rich Learning Spaces. Jisc infoNet, 2007. bit.ly/rUYRWs [Accessed 23 September 2011]

2 Innovative Practice with e-Learning, Case Studies, Supporting learners: designing flexible learning spaces, Northumbria University, HEFCE 2005. bit.ly/unilDn [Accessed 23 September 2011]

3 Jisc infoNET, as an externally funded service is not a constituent part of the new service model for delivering student facing services.

4 Core, J and Hordon, K (2010). Supporting learning beyond the classroom: developing the Northumbria Learner Support Model. *Emerge, 2,* pp.24 - 31. Available at: bit.ly/sllzau [Accessed 23 September 2011]

5 bit.ly/u70pTK

new support model as quickly as possible, and are kept informed of the progress of their enquiry if it needs to be referred. There is now wider support across longer service hours, as the range of enquiries that can be dealt with during the library's 24/7 services has been extended.

The student experience has been improved by saving time and ensuring they don't need to know how the university works in order to use the services effectively. Service efficiencies have been achieved by combining teams and streamlining processes. Finally, and in the longer term, we will be able to deliver enhanced services from a single physical service point as well as the virtual 'any time, any place' services provided by our email and telephone enquiry services. **U**