Increasing Student Engagement: Implementing an Online Model in a University Library

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Introduction

The UNSW Library Student Engagement Project began in late 2012 with the aim of investigating strategies to increase student engagement with the Library and build relationships with student services organisations to enable future opportunities to support students. As the undergraduate and coursework cohorts are large and often in disparate locations, the challenge becomes one of developing a sustainable communications model that reached beyond the campus grounds, yet still satisfies the requirements of classrooms rapidly transitioning into the digital landscape. As UNSW Library continues to help develop students' information seeking and management skills, the focus has shifted away from face-to-face classes and presentations and towards dynamic online content specifically aimed at commencing students, new communication channels, personalised feedback mechanisms and outreaching to the wider university community and student support groups. In this paper, we discuss the process involved in planning and developing a student engagement strategy within an Australian academic library context, and the steps involved in gaining buy-in and promotional opportunities within the wider university community.

Background

The University of New South Wales, Australia (UNSW) was founded in 1949 but its origins can be traced back to the Sydney Mechanics Institute which was founded in 1943. UNSW is currently ranked 48th in the world by QS World University Rankings, one of only five Australian universities to make this prestigious list.[1,2] Presently more than 50,000 students from 120 countries attend UNSW studying business, engineering, science, arts, medicine, fine art, law or the built environment.[3] UNSW is one of 43 universities in Australia one of only five in Sydney.[4] In addition to the main campus in Sydney, there are two other major campuses attached to UNSW: the UNSW Art + Design campus in the Sydney suburb of Paddington and UNSW Canberra at the Australia Defence Force Academy. The academic year at UNSW is divided into two semesters, one starting in early March and a mid-year intake in early July. In Australia, an undergraduate degree typically takes three years to complete, and one to two years for postgraduate.

Development of the In-person Service Model

In 2006, the Library went through an evaluation process to identify how the needs academic staff and postgraduate students could best be met. As a result of this evaluation, in person delivery of information services at UNSW Library were divided between two teams; the Academic Services Unit and Client Services Unit. In 2011, the Library redeveloped the building entrance, introducing a 'Help Zone' concept. This idea eliminated the traditional reference desk in favour of an open entry space, removing not only the physical

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but also the intangible barriers between staff and students. This simple change resulted in a 200% increase in reference queries compared to the previous year.[5]

The Client Services Unit (CSU) is the front line team that support students who contact the library directly either in person or online. These paraprofessionals answers quick queries, provide directional answers and assess complex requests (known internally as "Tier 2" questions) which are then forwarded to various departments throughout the library. The foci of the Academic Services Unit (ASU) are postgraduate students, the teaching community, and researchers at UNSW. ASU is further divided into two teams of librarians; Services, who primarily support the postgraduate students, while Outreach serve the academic community. Each Outreach librarian is assigned a faculty to work with which allows that librarian to develop intimate knowledge of the inner workings of their faculty, and provide a more customised service to individual academics. This division of duties gives each section of the university a dedicated library team to anticipate and respond to their needs. This model relies on heavily personal interactions with students and academics, which can be a challenge to scale with a full student and faculty compliment at UNSW.

Online Service Delivery

Prior to the restructure, the Library, in collaboration with the Academic Board, the Undergraduate Studies Committee and the technology centre, began to develop a self-guided information literacy tutorial known and quiz as ELISE.[6] In previous years, information literacy instruction would have been delivered by librarians at the beginning of each semester in time consuming face-to-face introductory lectures. The face-to-face model did not meet the University's increased emphasis on the blended online learning experiences and demanded a large amount of staff time.[7] ELISE was implemented to replace replaced many of these library classes and lectures. Successful completion of the ELISE quiz with a passing grade of 80% or higher is mandatory for commencing undergraduates, and because it is online and can be completed at

any time during the first five weeks of class, the process has minimal impact on valuable class attendance.

ELISE is also designed with academic community in mind. The Outreach team, in working with closely with their faculties, regularly reported that many of the library messages that had been delivered at the beginning of term were not required in the classroom until much later in the semester. ELISE not only addresses that concern by providing a concise library information that can be accessed at any time, but also allows lecturers to embed targeted messages because each section of ELISE discusses one aspect of information literacy. ELISE became a self-service information literacy point for students and academics alike.

In 2014, as part of a University wide renewed emphasis on undergraduate support, ELISE was updated to reflect current learning needs including the inclusion of more up to date videos. These videos were also placed on You Tube to allow for even more accessibility and easier distribution.

During this update, the Ask Us knowledge base was developed to bring together disparate library information into one searchable online space. Accessible via the Library website, it allows users to access answers to queries when the need arises rather than having to wait until a library staff member is available, or if it is outside of regular opening hours. The 'Ask Us' button appears on every page of the Library's website, encouraging the user to find answers when and where they need it. If the query and answer are not in the knowledge base, users can submit their question when the library answers, and it subsequently adds to the knowledge base. The library users then in turn help to build this base for future students. Of course, as successful as this approach is, it still primarily captures those clients looking for information one they are already on the Library website.

Identifying the Need for Communication Strategies

Communication with the undergraduate and postgraduate coursework cohorts has been historically difficult due to their size and heterogeneous makeup.

Unlike the US and UK, the majority of Australian students tend to commute to campus, rather than being part of a residential community, and as a result it might be assumed that many of their encounters with their tertiary library are specific and transactional in nature. Parameswaran and Bowers found in 2012 that of "the 1,000,000 university students in Australia, approximately 51,000 beds are currently available, indicating a 5% bed to student ratio" (compared with 42% in the US), and that this generally had a corresponding impact on student engagement levels.[8] Similarly, the Australasian Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE) found that 15 per cent of first year students live on campus in a university college or hall of residence, and 51% of first year students spend over 15 hours a week travelling to campus.[9] Without the additional aid of a 'captive audience', and the myriad of other student groups and activities competing for attention when first year students are on campus, the importance of having a core message that cuts through this and meets them at their point of need is paramount.

Student feedback highlighted areas for improvement in providing services and awareness at the students' point of need, particularly beyond the orientation period. Insync Library Client Survey Reports are a comparative biennial survey conducted in association with the Council of Australian University Librarians (CAUL). In 2007 and 2009, UNSW Library saw consistent responses from the undergraduate and postgraduate coursework cohorts.[10,11] For both groups, the consistent lowest performing factors included "I am informed about Library services" and "The Library anticipates my learning and research needs". This was perhaps indicative of a gap that exists between the services being delivered and the student perception of what the UNSW Library has to offer. In essence, the issue was one of communication.

Internal statistics also helped paint a picture of when students might need additional off-campus support. Help Zone statistics demonstrate a peak in awareness at the start of the year, but a significant drop in the weeks and months following. In 2011,

when the communications planning first began, an average of 1367 Tier 2 service counts per month were received face-to-face during the peak times of the Australian academic cycle in March/April/May and July/August/September. However, this figure would regularly drop by just over 68% to an average of 436 during those non-peak times, which supported the idea that students may not have been aware of continuing services available to them beyond the start of the semesters. (For face-to-face queries, this trend continued in 2014, with a peak average of 742 significantly dropping to an average of 152 queries. However, this has also coincided with a rise in online enquiries, aided by the Ask Us client management system). Given the large number of non-residential students at UNSW, these figures are understandable, but they did indicate that the point of need was not necessarily the Library building during assessment and exam periods.

Face-to-face presentations, one of the traditional means of conveying information to commencing students, had seen a rapid decline over the years. These one-hour seminars, typically conducted during orientation week (or "O Week" at UNSW), delivered core messages of where to locate the Library physically and online, how the Library could assist in saving students time, and how to "search smarter" to achieve a better quality of research. Yet the reach of these seminars is limited. For example, in 2012 approximately 70-100 students each attended a pair of introductory undergraduate seminars run by UNSW Library, with an additional 300 attending the two postgraduate equivalents. The following year that number halved, with the same amount of students attending a single undergraduate session. Although the Library also attended many of the individual faculty and school welcomes, these presentations averaged 5 to 15 minutes in which to convey the core threshold concepts that the Library uses to construct its learning outcomes. Given the number of commencing students annually, this could no longer be seen as the only effective means of communicating key messages and highlighting ongoing services.

Communications Planning

With over 12,000 students commencing at UNSW each year, even the most successful of these face-to-face strategies was only reaching a small fraction of the target cohort. UNSW marketing figures also suggested that less than 11% of students read their official UNSW e-mail. While a direct approach was more feasible for the Outreach Librarian model outlined above, the sheer size of the UNSW cohort made face-to-face classes untenable. In 2011, under the direction of the Services Team Leaders, the Library crafted a communications plan to respond to student feedback concerning unawareness of library services and messages, along with supporting the university's focus on developing online learning resources. This initially focused on social media, principally Facebook and Twitter, with the key objectives of the initial plan to ensure that students are informed of new and existing library services, to maximise communication through the use of a variety of channels, and ideally to increase the use of Library services as a direct result of communication.

The initiatives of the Communications Plan achieved some small degree of success in a short time, with over 800 students signing up as followers Facebook in the first 8 month period with little or no formal promotion or advertising. Additionally, networking with two of the larger student services groups on campus, and making links with other social network influencers in the UNSW community—including UNSW Marketing and Communications, responsible for the central social media channels at UNSW—enabled UNSW Library to start planning more broadly about strategy and how it fits in with existing infrastructure and communication channels in the university. The Library determined that the results of this trial warranted further investigation, and that a year-long project to investigate the ways in which UNSW Library could increase its engagement with the undergraduate and postgraduate coursework student cohorts would be initiated.

Student Engagement as an Ongoing Project

The UNSW Library Student Engagement Project be-

gan with the newly created Team Leader (Student Engagement) in November 2012. Designed to meet the UNSW Library strategic objective of "developing student's information seeking and management skills", the investigative project was an action initiative to address the issue of increasing student engagement with the Library. The objectives of this project were to:

- investigate strategies to increase student engagement with the library,
- build relationships with student service organisations to enable opportunities to support students,
- improve the attendance of the student welcomes and seminars,
- to aid the University in the retention and engagement of students at all levels of study.

The initial project was set up for a one year evaluation period, with several work packages making up the deliverables that would be evaluated in November 2013. These packages, based on target areas identified in the initial communications planning period, were built around a broad scoping phase that would include an environmental scan of similar initiative at other institutions, reworking the student orientation seminars to increase attendance, expanding the social media networks, liaising with student services groups, investigating alternative methods of gathering student feedback and planning events that could increase awareness of the Library and its services. In addition to the Team Leader role, a reference group consisting of rotating members primarily from the Academic Services Unit and Client Services Unit met regularly to provide the Team Leader guidance on the direction of the project and contribute to deliverables.

The project identified a number of key areas that would become part of UNSW Library's overall communications strategy. With a 155% increase in Facebook 'likes' over the project period, due largely to promotions outlined below, the project determined that social media was a viable alternative communications method for students. Beginning in 2014, the Student Engagement Team Leader role became an ongoing

one, with the position containing 5 work packages to be evaluated at the end of the calendar year:

To bring Library orientation initiatives in line with the online nature of the ELISE modules, developing embeddable videos to replace Library welcomes for undergraduate and postgraduate students,

1. 'Outreach' to student services organisations, including faculty student centres, faculty-based societies and other organisations,

2. Develop a social media strategy in line with the university's guidelines and code of conduct,

3. Improve feedback mechanisms and responses via student focus groups and other surveys,

4. Investigate opportunities for other promotions, events and marketing throughout the year.

The Student Engagement role continues at UNSW, using these work packages as the basic tenants of the position.

Measuring Success

The work packages chosen for the Student Engagement Project were done so because they were specific enough to be measurable. The principle area for improvement in engagement levels was in in the crucial orientation periods at the start of session. If the issue was one of scalability, then one measure was to compare the number of views of the videos as compared with the previous year's face-to-face numbers. With over 2,000 views, a significant 1833% increase was seen over the physical numbers, indicating a wider reach and the immediacy of the new format. Even more encouraging was that the videos continued to be viewed throughout the year in non-peak times, as the ability to return to these key messages was not something available to a face-to-face audience. The source of these views was also taken as a major measure of success: analytics indicated a large number of click-throughs from Getting Started, the university's Student Life and Learning (SLL) hub, and the online learning management systems (LMS) such as Moodle.

This suggested to the Library that lecturers and course providers were embedding the videos in their course materials. More videos were rolled out throughout 2014 and 2015, aimed at making the existing content in ELISE more engaging. A video entitled "Avoiding Plagiarism at UNSW" was an immediate success, garnering over 600 views in the first 24 hours.

Social media impact had its own measures of success, via the platforms' own analytics and Library targets around reach and numbers of followers. Throughout 2014, there was an additional 39% increase in Facebook likes over the previous year, due largely to the O-Week campaigns described below. Twitter had a smaller following, but was principally being used for more specific messages, experimenting with targeting it at researchers and postgraduates to some degree of success. Individual campaigns had a wide reach: the aforementioned plagiarism video, with its clear visual strengths and short running time, achieved a reach of 27,952 people (from only 3,234 UNSW Library followers) due to links and shares from key influencers in UNSW Marketing and Communications and individual students commenting and sharing. Similarly, an individual post in an ongoing vintage photograph campaign, using the existing #ThrowbackThursday hashtag, garnered 25,896 views due to high levels of engagement. Less engaged posts were the attempts at sharing new content or services. Often these were acknowledged with views or click-throughs, but rarely publically 'liked' or shared. However, the posts of this kind that were successful tended to be visually focused materials, that may have included photo archives or streaming videos. This led to an annual "Streaming Video Month", highlighting the often underused resources.

Social media was also an area where UNSW Library combined physical and online activities for promotion. Each year, the Library has a market stall as part of the student and external exhibitor O-Week activities. From 2013, we asked students to 'like' us on Facebook or follow us on Twitter in exchange for a UNSW Library branded water bottle. It was a campaign that required minimum effort on the part of the

FIGURE 1
Facebook Increases during O-Week Campaign 2013

student, and the reward for both the Library and student was instantaneous. In 2013, the pilot campaign netted a 30% increase in total Facebook likes. Just over 65% of the total likes are in the key demographic of 18-24 year olds, with an additional 20% in the 25-34 demographic. In 2014, the O-Week campaign remained strong, netting a 924% increase in engagement, and a jump of 17% in overall likes. This was indicative that while social media might be a great platform for communication throughout the year, more traditional promotional means still had a place in attracting potential uses to the digital spaces.

UNSW Library no longer participates in the aforementioned Insync survey scheme, so part of the Student Engagement Project was to look at alternative feedback mechanisms for undergraduate students. While Facebook and Twitter were emerging as alternative portals for immediate feedback, and Ask Us provided a self-service platform for clients, the Library sought a means of scratching under the surface of some of the recurring issues. In 2013, the Student Engagement Project conducted an informal investigation of student opinion on the use of Library spaces and technology, via a series of observational, conversational and social media methods. Students were observed using the spaces, given surveys on so-

cial media, interviewed both inside the Library and in surrounding spaces in a 'vox pop' fashion and invited to a focus group to discuss the topic in depth. It was the 'vox pops' and focus groups that yielded the most in-depth results. Students were generally high users of communal and informal spaces, electing to bring their own devices. Respondents repeatedly commented about wanting more space to spread out, the inadequacy of private study areas, printer problems, a desire for more charging stations and fewer individual backless stools. Most agreed that the future of the library was electronic and would include fewer physical books and also provide more student spaces. In 2014, a second focus group was run more specifically around Library services, although the turnout was significantly lower and yielded little useful information.

What's Next for Student Engagement at UNSW Library?

Having established a solid social media and communication framework within the context of existing units, UNSW Library will continue to look for opportunities to develop self-guided resources and expand engagement opportunities. At the time of writing, a digital research workflow targeted at postgraduate

students is in development. This tool is for inexperienced students who wish to follow a structured process to inform their future research. This comes off the back of a successful trial with postgraduate art students who have little experience in academic research.

The Library continues to move traditional services online and present them in a more user friendly fashion. As the suite of informational videos expands for ELISE, it has rolled into other services as promotional pieces for postgraduates and researchers. Yet underlying this is the notion of integrating UNSW Library endeavours with the operational needs and aspirations of the wider UNSW community. In addition the student point of need, the Library continues to ask the academic community what they are getting out of an online delivery method of library services, and what might they require in the future? What Library services can be available in the LMS for their own classes, and what are the potential opportunities to create new services where previously none had existed?

The primary aim of the Student Engagement initiative is to keep UNSW Library at the front of student minds, and alert them to new resources. Continuing communication with not only the Faculty social media programs but the academics themselves helps expand the legitimacy of the Library's social media endeavours. As the previous face-to-face lectures were delivered at the beginning of each session, a time that students are bombarded with information from various university organisations, the library's key messages were at risk of being lost in a sea of competing content. By ensuring that the communications channels remain flexible, embeddable and in line with the teaching needs of the academics, this may ultimately help in reaching the student body in a sustainable fashion.

Conclusion

A large and diverse group of students is difficult to reach in a multi-campus and transactional learning environment, and a successful communications strategy requires ongoing planning and clear objectives.

Shifting content and services from a face-to-face model to an online one allows for dynamic content to be made available to students and academics alike. This is only possible within the context of a wider strategy that involves the development of a self-service model of client services. Coupled with a coordinated communications approach that includes student services groups, existing marketing structures, physical events and academic channels, the approach has yielded immediate measurable results, and provides the framework for future communication with this growing and transitional student population.

Notes

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