

## **Unleashing the potential: new professionals in the workplace**

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*“Why didn’t anyone tell me that before now?” – a student*

A phrase sometimes heard from students in their second or third year, perhaps it means we haven’t promoted our services as well as we could. In this paper we will introduce you to what we believe makes a 21<sup>st</sup> century library user and based on this what they expect from their library service and its staff. We will consider the diversity of our users in an academic library. Following on from this we will address the skills that we as new professionals need to refine or gain in order to serve our users effectively – here we will look at the importance of user education and describe some of the innovative ways to run these sessions and engage with our users. Finally we will address how best we can market ourselves and our services to our users demonstrating this with examples of what we are currently working on at Aldrich Library at the University of Brighton.

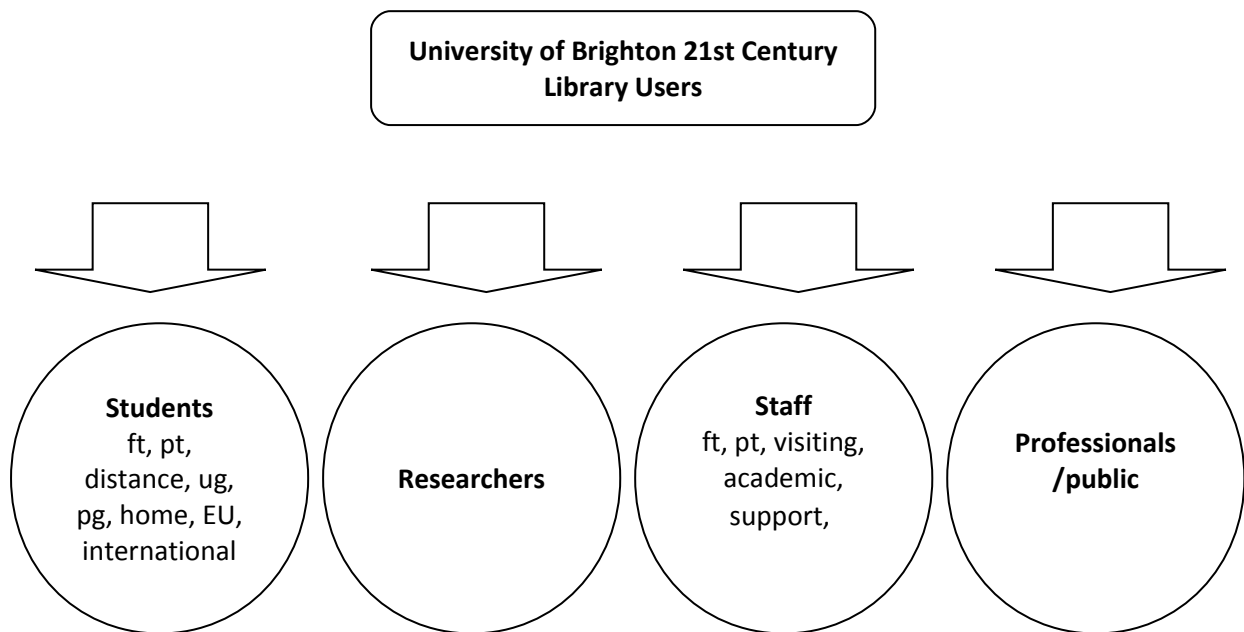
### **Defining the 21<sup>st</sup> century academic library user**

Finding out what makes the 21<sup>st</sup> century academic library user is a challenge. Like many other universities the University of Brighton has diverse student and staff populations, each with different experiences of using libraries and different expectations from their library. To highlight this, consider the following facts about the University of Brighton:

- The majority of our students, 14, 187 out of 21,218 (67%) (2007/2008 HESA data), across all levels, are over 21 when they begin their course.
- We have an established international student population; in 2007/2008 we had 1,188 international students and 1,398 EU students from 100 countries studying here.
- 8% of our students have declared a disability.
- 62% of our students are female.

These examples are just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to trying to define our 21<sup>st</sup> century library users and highlight the diverse nature of our student population.

The diagram below shows the different groups that make up our library users.



With this diversity in mind we looked at defining the different generations that make up our users to see if that could give us a clearer idea of our 21<sup>st</sup> century user characteristics. While this was helpful, it highlighted again the diverse nature of our users rather than pinning down the key characteristics of the 21<sup>st</sup> century user, as all of these generations use our library now, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The table below shows the key characteristics of these generations. (Redmond 2009)

**Table 1**

<b>Generation</b>	<b>Characteristics</b>
Baby Boomers (1943-1963)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Idealistic and altruistic</li> <li>• Socially liberal; politically conservative</li> <li>• Organisational and careerist</li> </ul>
Generation X (1964-1981)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Blurring of traditional boundaries</li> <li>• Lack of clarity –at home, work and in the world</li> <li>• Confident and independent</li> <li>• <b>'Digital immigrants'</b></li> </ul>
Generation Y (1982-2001)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Connected 24/7</li> <li>• Self confident</li> <li>• Optimistic</li> <li>• Independent</li> <li>• Bored by routine</li> <li>• Entrepreneurial</li> <li>• Goal oriented</li> <li>• <b>'Digital natives'</b></li> </ul>

What is important is that all of these users have a common interest in the library to support their learning. This could be visiting the library to use as a study space, to practice a group presentation, to use a computer, to find book or journal article – either in print or electronically, to borrow books etc. The generation a user belongs to will have an impact on the way they use the library in terms of how they approach and access information.

There is one characteristic that brings Generation X and Generation Y together distinguishing them from the baby boomers: the use of technology. Those belonging to Generation X are described as ‘digital immigrants’ and those belonging to Generation Y as ‘digital natives’ (Redmond 2009). For these generations technology has featured in some if not all of their life. This has had an impact on all aspects of their day- to- day living and therefore will have an impact on what they expect from their university and therefore their library.

‘An essential component of facilitating learning is understanding learners.’(Oblinger 2003, p.37)

This is prominent for us as information professionals as we need to understand our users as best we can in order to deliver the most efficient and accessible service. However, as we have already demonstrated our users span age ranges, have different learning styles and want to receive information in various ways and there is no tried and tested way to reach all of them. We need to repackage ourselves and show each of our users groups how we are relevant to them. This will be discussed further in the next section, which addresses marketing ourselves and our services to our users.

Brophy (2007) emphasises the importance of understanding our users needs in order to deliver an effective service:

‘The role of libraries in facilitating access to information remains central. In order to be effective, however, there is a need for understanding of the ways in which users seek, acquire and utilise information.’ (Brophy 2007b, p147)

So, how can we identify the key characteristics and needs of the 21<sup>st</sup> century academic library user? For the purpose of this paper we are going to concentrate on our generation X and generation Y users, which form a large part of our undergraduate student population and look at how belonging to these generations informs their needs as library users.

The characteristics of Generation Y listed in table 1 can be compared to the findings of Eng and Garnder (2005) in their study *What students want: Generation Y and the changing function of the academic library*. In this context we can see how generational characteristics inform the use of the library and what they expect and want from it. Generation Y:

- Have great expectations: quality academic facilities, high ambition and academic achievement, global information 24/7, refreshments and social areas.
- Expect customisation: where, when and how fast they learn, boundless learning environments, traditional library resources no longer tied to library’s physical space, preference for online research.
- Are technology veterans (digital natives): technology is not a tool; it’s a way of life,

integration of technology into learning, ATM approach – fast and easy research, low rates of research assistance.

- Utilise new communication modes: group learning – study rooms, collaborative group rooms, expect to try things rather than hear about things, low thresholds for boredom and short attention span

Brophy (2007b, p.140) summarises these points:

‘many users now expect services to be delivered and integrated into their working and living processes. So it is not enough for libraries to offer services and hope that users will come to use them; they have to establish new ways of providing seamless integration.’

In order to identify the needs of these users it’s important that we understand their characteristics as users. In this instance we have look at their generation and have identified key characteristics that will inform how they use their library. In addition to these generational characteristics there are also processes in place to get user comments and feedback. Combining these methods should help us define the 21<sup>st</sup> century library user.

### **Identifying library users needs at the University of Brighton**

There are several ways which we identify our library users’ needs at Aldrich Library at the University of Brighton these include;

- School board meetings with feedback from the course representatives and staff,
- Comments/feedback by comment form and email,
- Verbal comments at the enquiry desk,
- Information services student survey,
- Information services staff survey.

In addition to these methods we are in the process of developing a feedback wiki, which is hosted on our virtual learning environment, Studentcentral. At the moment this consists of staff recording any feedback we get on the wiki. In conjunction with this we are building a collection of stock replies to the most common feedback and questions. We hope that eventually we can roll this wiki out to students, so that they can add their own feedback and see clearly the answers to the most frequent comments.

Alongside the feedback wiki we also have a dedicated ‘Questions, Comments and Feedback’ notice board which features again some of the most common questions and comments we get along with our responses. These tend to be operational type questions and comments, such as why didn’t I receive my email reminder to renew or return my books? Why have I got these fines? It’s too cold in the library.

One of the difficulties with these initiatives is that we are a multi-site university and have 5 different libraries and while there are commonalities amongst us, there are also differences and it’s these differences we need to resolve before attempting to implement new initiatives across the sites.

Some ideas may work at one library but not be suitable for others. The work described here is specific to Aldrich library.

While it would be useful to look at all of these feedback mechanisms and how they can help us indentify our users needs and expectations for the purpose of this paper we are going to look specifically at the Information Services Student Survey and how that has informed us over the years.

### Information Services Student Survey

Each year we conduct a survey to find out what our users think of our services and to try and establish our priorities. We have data from 2005/2006 to this year (2009) and the response rates have varied over the years, the table below shows this and we can see that they have decreased significantly in the last two years.

**Table 2**

	2005/2006	2006/2007	2007/2008	2008/2009
Data collection method 1	Focus groups Nov 2005			
Data collection method 2	Studentcentral 13/02/06- 13/03/06	Studentcentral 27/11/06- 02/01/07	Studentcentral 25/02/08- 31/03/08	Studentcentral 10/11/08- 12/12/08
No. of responses	1001	1084	558	664

We know that our students are asked to complete module evaluation forms, other central departments such as Student Services also put out surveys to get feedback in order to help develop their services and so understandably they may suffer from survey fatigue. After several years of conducting this survey our survey group are going to implement smaller, more focussed feedback exercises as of November 2009.

The current survey asks users about all aspects of information services; libraries, computing and media centres. One of the things we ask that is specific to the libraries if for users to prioritise the following aspects of our services:

- Longer library opening hours
- More print copies of core texts
- More journals
- More electronic versions of core texts
- Quieter study areas
- More computers in the libraries
- More School software on open access pool room computers

- Pay library charges by debit/credit card
- Introduce Online payment for printing/photocopying
- More informal study areas in the libraries (coffee/books/wi-fi) – this option was added in the 2007/2008 survey.

The responses vary for each site. The table below shows the overall result for each year.

2005/2006	2006/2007	2007/2008	2008/2009
1. More print copies of core texts	1. More print copies of core texts	1. More print copies of core texts	1. More print copies of core texts
2. More electronic versions of core texts	2. More computers in libraries	2. More journals	2. Longer opening hours
3. Email warning when books are due	3. More journals	3. More informal study areas in the libraries	3. More electronic versions of core texts
4. Longer opening hours	4. More electronic versions of core texts	4. More electronic versions of core texts	4. More journals
5. More journals	5. Longer opening hours	5. More computers in the libraries	5. Quieter study areas

Clearly the demand for more print copies of core texts is paramount and unless we buy a copy per student, which is not financially feasible. What is important here is that we promote our desk loan collection and e-books of the core texts where available.

At Aldrich library we try and accommodate these priorities as much as possible. In response to the request for longer opening hours, for example, we have trialled 24 hour opening for the weeks leading up to and during the exams. This has been well received, but the logistics of the building where the library is mean there are some difficulties surrounding security, staffing, and cleaning.

We have also developed a Social zone in our library in response to a demand for an informal learning area, but this has had mixed response. These are some of the comments from the survey:

“I think it was a bad idea to put sofas and vending machines where there used to be study rooms. It’s a library not a hang out!”

“The informal work area/area for eating in the library is a good idea.”

These quotes highlight again the differences in our users and what they expect from the library. It demonstrates that we will never be able to please all of our users, but we can certainly offer explanations and the rationale behind our decisions.

Once the need and expectation has been established attention turns to what skills we need as information professionals in order to meet those user needs.

### **Skills of a 21<sup>st</sup> century information professional**

The function and role of the library has evolved considerably over the last few decades. Recent reports such as the report commissioned by the Research Information Network and the Consortium of Research Libraries which looked into researcher behaviour in academic settings has highlighted

the changing behaviours and expectations of library users which impacts how libraries are accessed and used, and therefore the role that information professionals have to play. Traditional skills associated with the librarianship profession are still relevant in the new electronic environment however, these skills such as information handling, evaluation of resources, training and facilitating sessions and a level of care for the customer (Sharp 2001, p.3). More recently Peter Brophy (2007a) has reported that “there is no doubt that new roles are opening up for academic librarians, roles which build on their traditional skills but challenge them to acquire new ones”. In addition to these traditional skills information professionals must try to keep up with developments in new technologies that can be utilised in information retrieval and be of use and relevance to the library customers.

As we all suffer from information overload, now more than ever, library users need to know that information professionals can help them to navigate the internet, develop better search skills and in the context of an academic library, our users need to know that they can approach their information advisers or the library enquiry desk for advice and assistance with using databases, searching for academic literature and using the library services efficiently and effectively.

There are an abundance of library and information professionals with blogs, the majority feature at least one post about our skills. Meredith Farkas (2006) summarises the skills and attitude we need to succeed:

- Ability to embrace change
- Commitment to public service/customer service orientation
- Comfort in the online medium
- Enthusiasm for learning new technologies
- Ability to troubleshoot technologies
- Patience and unflusterability
- Enthusiasm for learning and keeping up
- Project management skills
- Ability to question and evaluate library services
- Ability to evaluate the needs of all stakeholders
- Vision to translate traditional library services into the online medium
- Ability to compare and be critical of technologies
- Diplomacy skills
- Ability to sell ideas and library services

One characteristic for us as new information professionals that we believe is really important, which

Farkas mentions her in relation to learning new technologies, is enthusiasm. Maintaining this enthusiasm and having the desire to learn about new approaches will keep our jobs interesting and ensure that we are delivering the best library service that we can. We are both working towards chartership, Emma is starting out and Sarah is beginning to compile the portfolio. We are doing this because we recognise that taking charge of our own professional development is a key way for us to improve and enhance our skills, and ultimately the service we provide. We are fortunate to have the backing and encouragement of our manager as we attend workshops and embark upon the chartership route.

### **Marketing ourselves and our services to our users**

The library should have an effective marketing strategy in place to ensure our users know what they can expect from us, what services we deliver and what sorts of skills we have and can pass on through instruction and user education sessions. Corral and Brewerton (1999, p.234) points out that some information professionals may not see marketing as a core activity but as an optional extra which required huge resources of time and money. However, the authors go on to discuss how marketing a library service is an important part of assisting library managers and staff in the design, development and delivery of library services.

The skills of information professionals must be promoted, because people still suffer from information overload, have limited searching techniques and are unaware of the invisible web (Robinson 2006, p. 36) and information professionals have the necessary professional and transferable skills to assist users in becoming efficient seekers of information.

As information professionals our intentions are to try and keep our knowledge of new technologies that can aid library users utilise our services up to date, and to teach others skills and knowledge to aid information seeking. We are excited about the opportunities we have to teach users how they can use our resources, and other web-based (and popular) internet services to enhance their learning and research skills. However, we must be mindful of how we can promote our skills and abilities to academic staff and students so that they know to come to us about these issues, and not just to rely on popular internet websites and their existing knowledge in their search for scholarly research.

### **Importance of user education and use of technology to deliver workshops**

Sarah was inspired after attending an event in January 2008 about interactivity in information skills training organised by cpd25. This event, along with a workshop attended in Summer 2007 called Making the most of IT: Interacting with users organised by the Education Librarians Group really highlighted the importance of interacting creatively with attendees when running workshops or user education sessions, and also of the varying methods that information professionals can utilise information technologies in interactive and interesting ways to connect with our users.

Providing interesting and interactive workshops in place of sessions where we just stand in front of the group and work through a handout or a presentation enables us to engage the recipients more actively, which is recognised to be a far more effective way of teaching as it promotes interaction and engagement within the session. Research has shown that the most effective means of achieving optimum comprehension is to ensure students are engaged, feel involved and to some extent have

the opportunity to direct their own learning (Jones et al 2007). A suggestion from Peter Brophy (2007a, p. 517) is that 'librarians need to develop a much deeper understanding of how learning happens, of pedagogical theory and practice'.

Library staff have an important role to play when they have the opportunity to speak to a new cohort of students, or to lead workshops and user education sessions, and we want to be as well equipped as possible for these sessions. This can mean stepping out of the comfort zone and introducing interactive and new elements into a standard presentation. It may mean leading a workshop style session when previously you just stood and spoke to a group of students and demonstrated to them, where actually a more engaging and successful session may take place when students are participating on their own computer through the session (where facilities and equipment make this possible).

Recently, Sarah developed a workshop with a group, which in previous years had just been a session where students listen to the facilitator for an hour. The feedback via an online survey after the workshop session was very positive. Some wished the time had been longer, and the majority found it very useful and actually wished they knew much of the information sooner in their course. Providing users with the opportunity to feedback their comments is also an important element of user education and the library service in general. Students were given a clear handout and were led through exercises that taught them new database searching skills which they could practice and have library staff on hand to help if needed. They were guided through useful databases and given opportunities to ask questions throughout. All material including handouts and search exercises were made available via the virtual learning environment (VLE) so they could refer back to them.

Dennie Heye (2006) writes that creativity and innovation are two key characteristics of the successful 21<sup>st</sup> century information professional, which may be unwelcome to those members of staff who perhaps do not feel that they are particularly creative or have the confidence to try and be more innovative with their user education sessions. This is respected, and Heye suggests that it is actually possible to develop creative skills and facilitate sessions creatively and innovatively even if it doesn't immediately come naturally. He goes on to suggest ideas and techniques that can be implemented and encourages the reader to develop their creative skills using the methods and tips suggested. This is an encouraging article for information professionals seeking to enhance their user education sessions and the tools suggested are practical tips that can be implemented by anyone keen to try and be more creative and innovative in their teaching.

We also see that sessions we facilitate, mainly for information literacy or user education purposes are an excellent opportunity to show the attendees exactly what our range of expertise is, that we are aware of advances in technology that aid the efficiency of information retrieval, and can introduce skills and knowledge that users may not have been aware of about our services or products we provide. We can utilise this and other opportunities when meeting library users in person to really show our worth as information professionals and that there's more to us than just buying and organising books!

To follow are our top tips for marketing and promoting your skills to your 21<sup>st</sup> Century users. These suggestions may be more oriented towards professionals working in educational institutions.

- Make the most of opportunities: if you are invited to talk to a group of users, such as new staff or a new cohort of students use the opportunity to introduce yourself as a point of contact for the library and clearly let them know why they should be making use of you and the library service. If you're not invited when you think you should be then speak with the relevant person to ensure that next time you can have a few minutes to introduce yourself.
- Have a consistent presence online. This could be your own area within an organisations' Virtual Learning Environment or Intranet, or it could be your own website that you can direct people to. Utilise tools such as (micro) blogging software and RSS feeds to allow people to follow you and keep track of information that you post up. Keep it up to date and post frequently to keep the content active and interesting.
- Keep your finger on the pulse! Be aware of conferences happening on campus or events being hosted by the organisation where you work as you may be able to get involved with it. For example the library could be represented at an annual conference attended by academic staff. During breaks between sessions the attendees may have the opportunity to wander around supplier stalls, or to browse information about support departments. It is an informal way of meeting with existing or potential library users.
- Participate actively in departmental meetings to promote yourself and your role. For example at university course meetings if you are the library representative try and get a standing item on meeting agendas and ensure that those present know who you are and what you can do to assist them to utilise the library service more.
- If you're being innovative and creative in your workshops ensure that your colleagues and manager are also aware of what you are doing, especially if you're the first to be promoting more interactive sessions. It's great to share good experiences and new ways of doing things as this can encourage our colleagues.
- If you are in a large organisation try and find like minded colleagues and get together to plan further strategies and techniques of using web 2.0 technologies to promote service improvements and new services. Hopefully this means you won't be duplicating effort across different sites. Stay encouraged in a smaller organisation by gaining support from online networks of professionals, discussion lists, reading blogs and attending networking events (e.g local CILIP group) so that you don't feel alone.
- Try promoting your services to specific groups of users, for example academic staff. At the University of Brighton within Information Services, the Marketing Action Group is working on a plan to package up our services in a way that shows them how they can save time, help students with their research and learning, support their own teaching, and support their own research. These will be targeted campaigns delivered in a variety of ways depending on how people prefer to receive information, whether that's via RSS feeds, blogs and other technologies, or by physical documentation and meeting face to face.

## **Conclusion**

As new information professionals we have a lot to offer in the workplace. Identifying and connecting with our library users to support their learning is our priority although this has its challenges.

Recognising the key characteristics of all our user groups will help to inform us their library needs and expectations, allowing us to deliver a more efficient and user led service.

Maintaining enthusiasm and keeping up to date with what's going on in our profession is paramount if we are going to sustain an efficient service. Continuing our professional development will assist with this.

Marketing our skills and our services to users is essential. Again, recognising our users key characteristics will assist in developing a sound marketing strategy. Experimenting with and employing new technologies where appropriate to market ourselves and our services to our users also important and should be incorporated into any marketing plan.

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