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Learning Enhancement through Strategic Project Partnership

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15.1 Introduction

In 1996, the University of Wolverhampton appointed a Director of Learning Centres to lead the development of its library into a dynamic learning support service offering a range of environments for self-directed and peer group learning and to enhance the information environment supporting a community of 23,000 students and over 2,500 staff in the UK and overseas.

The process involved a hearts and minds change of expectations among academic staff about the contribution to expect from librarians and learning support staff in curriculum development, planning, validation and review and the development of both physical and e-learning environments. It involved investment in and re-skilling of staff, particularly in the areas of IT and media support, and incorporating learning skills development staff into the service. Staff achievement in the change agenda can be observed from the level of use of the campus-based centres and the associated “learn anywhere, work anywhere” services, on and off-campus, physically and virtually, by students and staff.

The University is a former polytechnic situated in the English West Midlands in an area of historically low aspiration and attainment at the compulsory educational level. Within this context the institutional priority is to enable and encourage individuals to realize their full potential and to achieve academic excellence through a flexible, innovative and vocationally focused curriculum.

A significant element in the development of the service over the past 6 years has been a range of activities nested with the institutional Learning and Teaching Strategy.
The 1999–2002 Learning and Teaching Strategy prioritized “Growing a learning community”. It focused on supporting the development of a population of knowledgeable staff who act as champions for improvement in the quality of student learning.

To support this priority, staff from academic schools and learner-focused services were invited to submit proposals for innovation and research projects aimed at improving student learning. The criteria for proposals, and associated evaluation strategies, were set by an institutional working group. Proposals from the learning centres were reviewed and endorsed by the centres’ Learning and Teaching Group. In autumn 2000, funding was allocated to 2 learning centre staff to conduct separate yet related projects in the area of information skills development.

15.2 Information Skills Development Projects

The first project (Ordidge, 2001) examined the impact of desktop IT on the empowerment of learners through information skills teaching. It evaluated Wolverhampton practice against national and international information skills models. Within the institution, it examined practice between liaison librarians working with different academic schools, and in some cases involving focused partnership with academic colleagues. In one school, information skills development was becoming embedded in the VLE (virtual learning environment) and the module had become a compulsory element of the course. As a result of the review of external practice the seven headline skills developed by the SCONUL Advisory Committee on Information Literacy (SCONUL, 1999) were adopted as the future model for Wolverhampton. The SCONUL recommendation for collaboration across academic, library and staff development colleagues was closely aligned to the agenda supported by the profile of the project as part of the Learning and Teaching Strategy. The project led to a West Midlands conference supported by the Universities Colleges and Research Group of the then Library Association on the theme of information skills in a virtual environment.

A second project (Pritchard, 2001), started from the premise that, while information skills sessions were thought to be “a good thing” by students and academic staff, there was little evidence in professional literature at that time of formal evaluation being used to gauge the impact and worth of such sessions. The project was based on 3 groups of students across different academic schools, initially offering them standard information skills sessions supported by pre- and post-session questionnaires, and followed through in a student focus group and interviews with module tutors.

A significant increase in confidence across all 3 groups was noted in the analysis of the post-session questionnaire responses. The focus group looked at most and least useful elements of the sessions and what skills participants had subsequently applied. Feedback from the focus group highlighted variations according to subject area. Discussion with module tutors focussed on the longer-term