

Students as partners in recruitment

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Introduction: interviews, collaboration and innovation at Worcester

During 2015, Library Services at The Hive, Europe's first integrated public and university library, have started to include students in the recruitment process for professional library posts, involving them in a range of activities that test the candidates. This was initiated as a response to recruiting to a new Student Engagement Co-ordinator post within the team. As the successful candidate was required to work closely with students in their day-to-day role, we were keen to bring them into the selection process.

Both The Hive and the wider university already have a strong culture of working with students, from the volunteers who work in The Hive¹ to the Students as Academic Partners projects² that are run collaboratively with staff and students. Giving students a greater sense of involvement and ownership is key to both of these initiatives and we hoped that the same benefits could accrue from student involvement in recruitment.

Another key driver was that we routinely look for qualities of innovation, creativity and commitment to collaboration in prospective employees and wanted to espouse these values more clearly in our interview processes. Interviews have long been collaborative affairs and, depending on the nature of the post, members of academic staff, ICT colleagues or Student Union officials may be invited to join the interview panel. Work-related exercises that accompany the interview are overseen by or undertaken with colleagues other than those who sit on the interview panel, thus allowing a wider range of people to feed into the selection process and for candidates to meet more of their prospective colleagues.

In short, we aimed to:

- include students, increasing their sense of ownership of library services;
- showcase our innovation to prospective employees and embed the values we seek in them into the interview process;
- see how candidates interact with students;
- learn something about the candidate that a more traditional approach, such as a presentation, might not tell us.

To achieve this, we needed:

- an activity that would allow students to interact with candidates and feedback their thoughts;
- an activity that could be overseen by a member of staff with experience of recruitment and selection, who could ensure that students' feedback was appropriate and not discriminatory;
- a group of willing and capable students.

Testing the idea: Student Engagement Co-ordinator interviews

The work-related exercise designed for these interviews saw candidates working in pairs with a group of students. In their invitation to interview, candidates were told that they would be taking part in a group exercise, but had no further details. They were given the following brief on the day shortly before they were due to begin the exercise:

Your first task as Student Engagement Co-ordinator is to scope out a library innovation competition, whereby students can suggest ideas to enhance service delivery. Successful ideas are put into practice with the winning students being involved in implementation. You have thirty minutes to work with the students in front of you to brainstorm ideas,

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scope feasibility, and come up with some recommendations for this event. You may use the flipchart paper to write down bullet points, draw a mind-map or otherwise record your ideas.

A small group of students were offered the chance to join this exercise. Five were casually employed by Academic Services at the time, whilst a sixth had recently completed a work placement project module with the team. Four accepted the offer, although only two turned up on the day. All four were given the brief in advance, alongside an outline of their role in the exercise.

Two academic liaison librarians supervised and observed the task, marking the candidates on the following criteria:

- ability to engage others;
- understanding importance of, and responsiveness to, student feedback;
- creative approach to problem-solving;
- innovation and openness to change;
- ability to communicate ideas.

Useful information came from the students' subconscious responses to candidates; in some cases, candidates' body language showed very clear engagement (leaning forward, nodding, expressive hand movements) and in others very clear disengagement (physically moving away from candidates, folding arms, etc). The students were also asked for their feedback at the end of each exercise, both on the candidates and the exercise itself (see below).

Both the students' verbal feedback and their observed responses confirmed the liaison librarians' opinions of the strongest candidate, who went on to perform well in the interview panel. As a token of appreciation, students were sent a £10 Amazon voucher afterwards.

Building on success: academic liaison librarian interviews

Feeling positive about these experiences, we decided to involve students again in interviews for an academic liaison librarian post. Given the 50% attrition rate in our volunteers in the previous round, and because these interviews were to be held at the student-unfriendly time of 09:00 on a Monday, we were significantly more active in ensuring that students who signed up were committed to attending. Amazon vouchers were promised in advance as an incentive, and students were reminded of the value of the activity for their CVs and for use in their Worcester Award log books – Worcester's employability award for use in their Higher Education Achievement Record. Only two students were needed, but eight or nine were signed up, with the extra students taking part in a focus group. A number of confirmation emails ensured that nearly all students turned up on the day.

As part of their invitation to interview, candidates were given the following brief:

Imagine you are in post and you find that your only allocated contact with students for teaching library and information skills in a particular subject area is a single lecture very early in their first year. You are given the opportunity to change this. What sort of session(s) do you propose to run instead? What technology might you use (if any)?

Your presentation will take place in the form of a 'speed dating' type of exercise, where you move from one table to the next to repeat the conversation while meeting the needs of your new audience. You will have no more than 7 minutes with each of the following:

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- Table 1 – 2 students
- Table 2 – 1 academic liaison librarian
- Table 3 – 1 member of academic staff

Please note:

- You may wish to do this as a 'sales pitch' or initiate a dialogue. However you choose to deliver your idea, you should allow time for questions and discussion.
- There will be a member of staff keeping you to time, ensuring you speak to all three tables. Each table will be making notes to feedback to the interview panel.
- You will not have any technology available to you on the day.

The resulting activity was hectic, but highly productive and enjoyable, with a variety of discussions taking place at each table.

Benefits and feedback

From the perspective of those recruiting, the involvement of students was a resounding success. We felt that adding the student perspective tended to confirm the views of others in the recruitment process and, in some cases, helped elucidate elements that we had a feeling about but could not quite pin down, e.g. a candidate we felt might be slightly intimidating caused students to physically shrink back.

Speaking to candidates at interview and after they had started their employment with us revealed that they were a little daunted by the exercises we set, but fully understood the point of the exercises and their value. However, it did overshadow the interview itself for some candidates, who spent more time preparing for the exercise than for the interview itself.

Students, meanwhile, valued the opportunity to be consulted on library roles that would affect them. After one round of interviews, we were contacted quite swiftly by one student who expressed considerable interest in knowing who had been appointed. They also valued both the opportunity to add this experience to their CVs and real-world experience of being involved in recruitment.

Lessons for the future?

Despite its successes, this approach is not without challenges. The first is a concern about student reliability, particularly when interviews start early in the morning. Financially incentivising the process helps students understand the morning as a valuable use of their time. Similarly, running a second, concurrent activity (e.g. a focus group) was helpful as this meant that if students failed to arrive or dropped out at the last minute, we could use the second group as a back-up.

The second, possibly greater, challenge is in clearly outlining to the students their role in the selection process and making clear that their voice is one of many. For example, one student showed a clear preference for a candidate who, although appointable, was agreed to be the least experienced by all other members of both the work related exercise and interview panel. When the student choice does not tally with the rest of the selection team, this needs to be fed back carefully to students to ensure that they understand the full picture.

Our personnel department have also raised concerns around recruitment and selection training. Unlike other staff involved, students have not completed this

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training and may be unwittingly prone to indirect discrimination. However, their feedback in both exercises has always been mediated by staff who have been trained, ensuring we are not leaving ourselves open to claims of discrimination. In future iterations, we will set expectations even more explicitly, ensuring that they know their feedback is part of the process, and give them feedback afterwards on who was chosen, particularly where it has not coincided with their own thoughts. We may ask students to sign a set of terms and conditions that make explicit the expectations on both sides. We are also considering making recruitment and selection training a facet of the new Hive Student Ambassadors scheme that we are developing under the student engagement banner.

Challenges aside, there is no doubt that we will continue experimenting with this approach. Our next set of interviews is looming and we have set ourselves some high standards in thinking up innovative, inclusive and illuminating new work-related activities to help recruit excellent candidates.

References

- 1 The Hive, 2015. Jobs and volunteering. Available from: <http://www.thehiveworcester.org/jobs.html> [accessed 1 September 2015]
- 2 University of Worcester, 2015. Student as academic partners. Available from: <http://www.worc.ac.uk/edu/1188.htm> [accessed 1 September 2015]

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