
Conference review

Partnerships for higher education in further education: the library perspective

A conference organised by the University of the West of England, University of Plymouth and the University of Bath

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Delivery of higher education (HE) level courses in further education (FE) through inter-institutional partnerships has been happening for many years now. These involve varying degrees of engagement, from colleges with one or two courses with a few students, to multiple higher education institution (HEI) partners, and from HEIs with a few hundred FE-based students to those with several thousand. Library/learning resource centres (LRCs) are key in supporting this HE experience for learners based in FE settings, with information literacy and the finding, evaluation and critical questioning of knowledge being a key part of HE-level learning. Supporting the library element of these partnerships from both the HE and FE partner perspectives is something that many library staff are involved in, often in conjunction with other roles, and perhaps without a full awareness of how others are going about supporting this engagement elsewhere.

It was from talking about these issues at a regional level that staff involved in supporting partnerships at UWE, Plymouth and Bath Universities decided to plan a nationally focused conference on this type of engagement to bring together the library staff undertaking such roles. The organisers wished to broaden the outlook from our (often overlapping) regional networks and take a wider view of these partnerships and support. A key goal of the conference was to bring people together and to build networks of support.

The one-day conference held in November 2010 fulfilled this aim and brought together a range of speakers from FE and HE environments to talk about what we do, what we could do and the environment in which we work to achieve this. There was an introduction by UWE Federation Director Jonathan Simmons, outlining the importance of the 'contestability of knowledge' as a key HE principle with obvious implications for libraries supporting HE in FE. The keynote from Mark Stone (Associate Dean, Teaching & Learning, University of Plymouth Colleges) addressed themes that resonated throughout the day, explicitly and implicitly. His presentation on 'Communities in a library context' focused on the need for clear articulation of the contribution of the library services during a period of extreme scrutiny and review, as well as the need for advocacy backed up by data.

Roz Howard's presentation covered the skills needed for transition from FE to HE and the work she has done at the University of Salford to develop a 'Skills for HE: learning to learn' module (40 UCAS points) for their widening participation students. Particularly interesting was how library staff engaged with and developed this and the level of institutional involvement and support.

Eleanor Johnston and Andy Henrys (West Cheshire College) outlined support at their college, particularly in relation to a new foundation degree; they covered reading lists, use of virtual resources and relationship with the HEI, Staffordshire University.

The University of Sunderland presenters (Elizabeth Astan, Leanne Young, Julie Archer and Christine Stevenson) battled the snow to arrive twenty minutes before their (Petra Kucha) presentation covering four projects there, including 'Mind the gap', which seeks to identify skills gaps in prospective students of pre-university entry age, the use of university library resources by students studying a foundation degree in a local partner college; an overview of an initiative between the library and academic staff in the business faculty to raise awareness of library resources within distance learning colleges; and findings from a research-informed teaching project which considered how FE students' expectations can be met, their potential developed and how gaps in their research skills may be bridged.

Karen Storms from West Herts College outlined the skills workshops that she had presented to a group of pre-university students, and participants

were then asked to consider what they thought should be included in such workshops. The workshops included understanding the assignment brief, internet researching, using electronic journals, paraphrasing, avoiding plagiarism and writing at an academic level, this last skill providing some debate about the role of librarians in supporting this.

Simonetta Taylor of Bicton College provided an interesting presentation on the methods used in supporting HE learners at a small land-based college whose information needs are very diverse. Lee Bryant and Sue Caporn of City of Bristol College reported on a Help-CETL (Higher Education Learning Project, Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning) project looking at investigating patterns of eBook usage, to identify barriers and look at recommendations for LRC/library managers, whilst also outlining the process of undertaking such a research process and posing the question of why not do some research ourselves.

'E resources: deal or no deal', presented by Karen Foster and Amanda Isaac, was an innovative way of presenting the findings of a report which explored the barriers to foundation degree students' use of online information retrieval in three FE colleges. The research was funded by a grant from the Help-CETL project. The presentation was delivered as a trading game where participants had to gamble on opening the next box to find further information on how students felt about using online resources. Key messages suggested that online resources are very popular once the students understand how to use them, so training is essential. Students then become more likely to turn to librarians for advice on information retrieval rather than their friends and understand that the resources provided for them are more reliable than those they find by general internet searching.

Andrea Hatton (Staffordshire University) facilitated a workshop session on the impact of libraries on student retention based on her own work at Staffordshire. Key themes were raised around not only information literacy but also around the wider role of the library in the student experience, as well as how to measure impact.

Adrian Macey and Lisa Souch (Exeter College) gave a presentation on the collaborative working between subject librarians and HE tutors at Exeter College using video recordings of college staff, particularly librarians, explaining the core of their work. In terms of an overview of a service and the

strong relations that can be developed between teaching staff at colleges and the college librarians, this provides a really engaging model for good practice.

One thing that emerged throughout the day for me is that there is much excellent support of information literacy within the HE in FE setting, and that whilst there are some quite distinctive approaches there is much similarity across the country in both the support of the students and the support of the partnerships. The level and timing of librarians' involvement in programme development and delivery obviously varies and the impacts on delivery of information literacy were raised. The level of engagement for any institution in this activity and the resourcing at the library/LRC level are quite obviously key factors in what is being done. Involvement of the HEI in support varies and this reflects not only the type of partnerships in existence to run programmes, but also around expectations from both partners. There were also discussions about the sharing of resources, particularly electronic delivery; methods of enhancing the transition experience and student expectation was another strong theme that emerged.

The post-Browne environment will have an impact on the evolution of delivering HE in FE, but just how will be borne out over time. How the partnerships work to support and deliver higher education in this way will continue to be important. This conference has highlighted, again, the key role of libraries in the support of the HE experience in FE, and the inventiveness of approaches to support learners as well as the opportunities for collaboration to enhance both the student experience and the value of the partnerships that are in place to deliver it. The keynote speech set the tone for how we communicate this good practice within and outside our institutions and how what we do adds value to the learning experience of HE in FE learners, with the associated question of how we can measure this.

Many new contacts were made; a mailing list was established and can be found at
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Presentations from the conference can be found at
<http://www.uwe.ac.uk/library/info/conf/heinfeconference.htm>