Open Learning Resource Centre at the University of Huddersfield

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Abstract

The Open Learning Resource Centre (OLRC) at the School of Computing and Mathematics, University of Huddersfield provides a quiet environment with seated study places for up to sixty students. The Centre originally operated from 8.30am to 4.30pm every day but that has now been extended to cater for the needs of part-time students. Every day a tutor provides a surgery on a one-to-one basis to answer questions posed in mathematics, statistics or operational research (MSOR). It was also commended by the QAA Visiting Panel during a recent Teaching Quality Assessment.

The Execution

In 1987 the Dean of the School of Computing and Mathematics set aside a small tutorial room and equipped it with shelving to house books and other teaching materials. In addition a small number of tables and chairs to seat up to eight students were installed along with a desk and office area for a part-time technician. The Dean christened it the Open Learning Resource Centre (OLRC) and its purpose was to provide the School's students with a focal point to which they could bring their academic problems. The room was quite small and for some time the Centre was seen as a curiosity and was not particularly well or regularly used. When we started to provide one-to-one tutorial assistance. It soon became apparent that the students appreciated the service offered. As time progressed and the students became more aware of the facilities available, the part-time technician became full-time and the room was moved to a larger space. The room then became a focal point for staff as well as students and eventually, with further expansion the Centre could accommodate 20 students for private study. Also, one half of the room had been partitioned off to provide space for ad hoc tutorials especially for those students who needed extra help with their mathematics and who could be persuaded that additional tutorial assistance would be of benefit to them. The Centre also received a grant from the University to install six computers, each equipped with its own video disc.

In 1992, the School moved to its current premises, a large converted woollen mill, and the OLRC was provided with a much larger space which it shared with the new Teaching and Learning Resource Centre (TLRC) overseen and operated by a full-time secretary. The latter was installed in response to staff interaction in the OLRC and aims to provide information and assistance to the staff of the School to aid in their pedagogy. The OLRC now provides a quiet, welcoming environment with seated study places for up to 60 students. The Centre originally operated from 8:30am to 4:30pm every day but that has now been extended to 6:30pm on Mondays, Tuesdays and Wednesdays to cater for the needs of part-time students. Every day from 1:15 to 2:15 (12:15 to 2:15 on Tuesday) a tutor provides a surgery on a one-to-one basis to answer questions posed in mathematics, statistics or operational research (MSOR). The Centre is designated solely as a student resource and is not used for formal teaching or group tutorials. To support these activities a number of in-house documents are available dealing with specific aspects of MSOR and Key Skills, a small library of basic texts and four PCs linked to the School Intranet.

The PCs provide access to a range of mathematical software located on the School's servers as well as a number of Computer Assisted Learning (CAL) units held on CD ROMs. The Centre also acts as depository for lecturer's notes, provided by any lecturer who wishes to place his or her lecture notes on record. Photocopying facilities are provided and one corner is devoted to a quiet sitting area where students can read the various magazines provided.

The overall responsibility of the OLRC falls to an academic but it is supervised by a full-time administrator who is responsible for the day-to-day smooth running of the Centre. He acts, inter-alia, as librarian, issuing books, short-term loan items and print credits as well as managing the small shop that sells stationery items and various computer related items. All items are sold as near cost as can be managed.

What Support Was Needed?

The support that was required to initiate the Centre came from the Dean and in the early days the cost was minimal. The only real cost was the room as the part-time technician who looked after the Centre had other duties to attend to. The aim was to provide a quiet area where a lecturer could discuss academic problems with a small group of students away from his or her office. As time progressed support was given by the Dean to enable a positive response to student demand. The University operates a Devolved Revenue policy and so the financial support that is now required to run the Centre comes from the School. This provides the resources to employ the administrator and to provide time-tabled academic hours for six academics who act as daily tutors. In addition, the Centre has a budget from which it purchases all the stock that it sells via the shop as well as other items that help to improve the service provided. For example, last year the Centre purchased a heat-binder so that students could bind their Project Reports in a more professional manner than is possible with the comb binder.

The Barriers

When the original idea was mooted there were no barriers because it had the full support of the then Dean of the School. The only perceived barrier was the size of the facility to be afforded. The principle has always been one of active support for student-centred learning coupled with a desire to meet student demand as near as possible. In the early days the Centre had no budget allocation and so had to ask the School for any items that were needed. In practice, provided a good case was made, there was very little resistance from the School. Now, the Centre has its own budget which is used to purchase supplies for both the shop and the Centre.

The Enablers

The Centre was originally envisaged as providing a facility for the School's students, both in computing subjects and MSOR. The MSOR team soon came to realize the potential offered by the Centre and because the MSOR team derive much of their work from service teaching it was widely advertised and has become used by students from all over the University.

Evidence of Success

The success of the Centre can be measured by the amount it is used, which is significant. As time has progressed the Centre has grown from a small room used occasionally by a handful of students to the significant facility it now is with over 18,000 student study-visits and a further 12,000 shop-visits each year. It was also commended by the QAA Visiting Panel during a recent Teaching Quality Assessment.

How Can Other Academic Reproduce This?

By starting small and demonstrating that a demand is there. Attempting to meet the demand will inevitably cause the provision to grow. What is essential is an experienced MSOR team of academics who are willing and able to walk into a problem blind on a one-to-one basis and try to solve it for the student. Furthermore, if they feel they cannot solve it they need to know that they have at least one colleague to whom they could refer the problem without the colleague feeling that they are being put upon. The system runs as a team effort by the academics with individuals being rewarded by their time spent in the OLRC being recorded as part of their teaching commitment. As always it is down to the personalities involved and their generosity of spirit.

Quality Assurance

The quality of the provision is continually monitored by attention to student requests and suggestions. The provision of learning aids are also periodically reviewed and, where necessary, updated.

Other Recommendations

- Collect a team of willing academics.
- Find a reasonable location. If possible choose a location where staff can congregate as well – near a kettle is a very good place.
- Start small, don't be too ambitious to begin with.
- Advertise as widely as possible.
- Be absolutely regular with assistance. The students need to know that if they turn up at a given hour there will be someone there to assist.
- Let the students drive the development.