Library and University Collections Volunteers

The aim of involving volunteers and interns with our work is to teach professional skills in this area, and to support students who demonstrate a vocational interest in the library, museum or archives sector.

**Target Audience:**All students

**Staff Involved:** Library and University Collections Student Support Officer, Curatorial Staff, Archivists, Librarians and all other staff working with the University Collections

**Date:** Ongoing

Key features

Volunteer and intern placements are an important part of the work of the Library and University Collections and contribute a great deal towards the overall success of the department. The aim of involving volunteers and interns with our work is to teach professional skills in this area, and to support students who demonstrate a vocational interest in the library, museum or archives sector. A variety of roles are available for students working on a range of projects and tasks, and we also take placements and interns from a number of academic courses. The focus of these placements is skills development, from working in a professional environment, to the specific skills required to apply for a related postgraduate course.

Key aims and outcomes for this initiative are:

* opportunity for students to develop skills and professional work experience outside their academic studies;
* opportunity for students to develop an understanding of the sector requirements (i.e. what would be required to start a career in one of these sectors); and
* increased awareness of the role of Library and University Collections and their position and function within the University.

Planning

A number of volunteers have previously been given roles within Library and University Collections, but often this was on an ad hoc basis, and only a limited amount of support was offered. In September 2012 a Student Support Officer was appointed to start co-ordinating and managing the intern and volunteer programme. Work initially focussed on establishing a formal policy for volunteers working in the department and developing new roles.

Project

Following on from an initial period of review, the volunteer and intern programme has been extensively developed and now incorporates all of the departments within Library and University Collections and some additional areas. At the outset of this project only a small number of volunteers were given the opportunity to work with some specific collections. Since reviewing this, the number of volunteers has increased by significant proportion, the range of collections volunteers can work with has more than doubled, and the type of roles available has been dramatically increased. The result of this is that students are given more of an opportunity to work with our collections, to develop relevant skills and to increase their sector awareness.

The majority of our student volunteers attend between half a day a week and one full day a week depending on their schedules. All volunteers receive a full induction to the department and additional training on their specific tasks. They are assigned a supervisor who will be responsible for monitoring their work throughout their placement. The volunteer supervisor and Student Support Officer are both involved in the ongoing support and development of each of the individual volunteers and will provide any additional training or support that is required. Professional and career advice can also be offered for anyone studying, or planning to study, a further vocational qualification.

The tasks assigned to volunteers range from assistance with an exhibition installation to helping to catalogue rare books, from a role as a museum guide and to working with collections of digital images and photographs. All professional and curatorial staff in Library and University Collections can supervise a volunteer, and the areas they have volunteers working in will reflect their own areas of expertise.

Volunteers are given a reasonable amount of responsibility and autonomy, depending on their particular tasks and existing skill set. Staff have enjoyed the opportunity to supervise and manage volunteer projects, especially if new projects are involved.

Resources

The main resource involved in this activity is staff time; the Student Support Officer is involved full-time in co-ordinating all of the positions and roles throughout the division, but all volunteer roles require individual supervisors to advise on their specific projects.

An initial period of about six to eight weeks was used to identify appropriate volunteer roles and supervisors, establish a suitable framework and create supporting documentation. Having established the framework and guidelines for volunteers, it is easy to extend the same model to any new tasks as projects change and new roles as they become available.

The majority of staff time spent on this now is in relation to supervision of existing volunteers, and on recruitment and training of new volunteers. These are ongoing requirements of the programme, but the time spent on this is rewarding for both the staff and students involved.

Evaluation

Volunteers have been working with the department for a number of years, but the recent expansion has provided us with a large number of new volunteers who bring their own skill set and areas of interest to their position. Many of our volunteers have gone on to secure paid positions, some of which have been in our own department and the feedback we have received from staff and students has been incredibly positive.

Advice

The tasks volunteers undertake with Library and University Collections do not in any way replace the roles of our paid staff. The roles they fulfil are purely to support our work, and are an opportunity to gain training and experience in our professional sectors within the University environment. The department has benefitted enormously from the input of volunteers and we see them as a fantastic opportunity to engage with students and other academic departments. Many of our volunteers have gone on to secure paid employment within the relevant sector as a result of their volunteering activity with us.

The vast majority of our volunteer placements have been a huge success, but not all of them have worked out in the long term. This has been due to a variety of reasons, but mostly about scheduling conflicts and other commitments. We try to be as flexible as possible to fit around a student’s academic schedule in term time, and we also expect that some volunteers will not be available at all during the summer and other holidays.

Taking this into account, we have had to ensure that the work volunteers do is not time critical, and can be completed at any time. We were aware of these issues at the start of the project and have been able to organise and schedule volunteer roles and tasks accordingly.

Similarly we understand that some students are not able to commit to volunteering during term time, but may be available during the summer. In order to accommodate this we have designed some roles to be completed during this time, so as to ensure all students can participate at a time suitable to them.

Key contact

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<http://www.ed.ac.uk/employability/staff-information/how-employability-addressed/good-practice/university/library-and-university-collections-volunteers>