Website user evaluation for the School of Arts, Languages and Cultures

Results of a user study and focus group with Manchester Youth Forum

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This document describes the results of the website user study and focus group held with members of the Manchester Youth Forum, for the School of Arts, Languages and Cultures.

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1   Introduction

A website user study and focus group were conducted for the School of Arts, Languages and Cultures on Tuesday 13th November 2012. Four students from the Manchester Youth Forum took part. All were culturally Muslim and female; three were aged 16 and are in the process of deciding on sixth form colleges, while another was 17 and was in the process of deciding on Universities (see Appendix A for full details of the participants). None of the participants intended to apply to the School or study the type of courses offered by the School, so it is difficult to assess how generalisable the full data from the study and focus group is.

The session lasted approximately 2 hours in total. Participants spent around 15-30 minutes exploring the website and completing predefined tasks, and the remaining time contributing to the focus group.

2   User Study

Users completed a number of tasks and answered a number of questions (see Appendix B for a full list). The sections below summarise aspects of the website that participants particularly liked or disliked, the issues that arose as they completed the tasks, and recommendations that may help to address those issues.

Participants were asked to imagine themselves to be in a number of scenarios, and complete a number of directed tasks. As three of the participants were not at the stage of applying to university, and none were planning to study subjects related to Arts, Languages and Cultures, they experienced some difficulty understanding the tasks and scenarios, and as such completing the tasks. It is possible that prospective students with a more relevant background would not have experienced difficulties to the same extent.

2.1   Course information

Participants were asked to choose a degree course based on their own A-levels or preferences, and find various types of information related to it, including the course units you could study, general teaching and learning information, entry requirements and whether or not you could study abroad.

The participants did not find these tasks particularly easy, not least because they were not familiar with the subject areas. Only P2 managed to find this information on the website for a specific degree course (Drama and English Literature). P4 relied principally on the downloadable brochure to obtain information about Archaeology, P3 found information on the SPLAS home page, and P1 struggled to find any useful information at all. Only P3 located satisfactory information about what to do after receiving an offer.

The main problem was that the information about individual degree courses, e.g. `http://www.alc.manchester.ac.uk/subjects/drama/undergraduate/ugcourse/course/?code=06613&pg=all` was very hard to find. Whilst participants had no trouble accessing the subject home pages, getting through to concrete details about courses proved difficult.

P2 said the information on the SALC site compared unfavourably to that she had found on the UoM site. 'This is different to the one I looked at at home... the main University site. I preferred that one because it had an A-Z of subjects. I clicked on Biology and it said where it is, your course, your funding, the grades you needed.'

Recommendation

Participants confused information about subject areas with information about degree courses. Making information about undergraduate degree courses directly accessible could make a big difference. A good option would be to add a tab on the top menu taking users directly to (for example) an A-Z list of undergraduate degree courses. The 'Browse our subjects' box could be replaced by a 'Browse our courses' box.

2.2 Images

Three out of four participants preferred the changing images on `http://www.alc.manchester.ac.uk/subjects/englishamericanstudies/` to the static images on `http://www.alc.manchester.ac.uk/subjects/Archaeology/`. P1 said they 'keep your mind active.' P3 was very keen on images, and felt the website was too text heavy in general. P4 said she preferred the changing images, although she couldn't say why.

P2 didn't have a preference, but commented that the images themselves weren't particularly interesting: 'I would prefer something more eye catching.' She thought that bites of information about pass rates, for example, would be more likely to draw her attention. When looking at the home page she said,'I like the fact it's got an open day [picture] there. I like the fact it's got pictures of.. about the university in general – showing more of the university. It gives me a broader idea of what's happening.'

Recommendation

Most of the participants preferred the changing images, so it is a good idea to employ this type of content on the site. Informative images that tell users something specific about the School or University are more likely to catch their attention and 'add value' to the website.

2.3 Employability information

The participants found varying degrees of employability information. P1 misunderstood the task and searched for job vacancies in the University, although the first result lead to the careers page for the degree in Classics and Ancient History on the legacy site, which she said would be useful if you wanted to be a history teacher.

P2 found the career opportunities information on the Drama and English Literature part of the site, and P3 found information about the kinds of employment SPLAS graduates had gone on to.

P4 skimmed over the 'sought after by employers' section in the Archaeology brochure, but either didn't notice it or didn't think it was relevant. She spent some

time looking round the site, but failed to find any information about careers or employability. P4 raised the issue that information about peripheral issues, such as employability, was not important to her. She said, 'when I visit a university website I'm just looking for the course I want to study, the modules, the entry requirements, and how it's examined and taught. And maybe study abroad stuff. I don't really look at careers, I'm just interested in the core facts about the subject.' It should be noted that P4 was intending to study medicine or neuroscience, however, and the career path for such subjects is already well mapped out.

Recommendation

At present employability information is difficult to find. In addition to careers information for individual courses, making the central resource for the site richer and more accessible (e.g. linking to it from the home page), would demonstrate to prospective students that SALC graduates go on to exciting and rewarding careers.

2.4   Search facilities

P1 used the main search facility several when looking for a geography course, but ultimately didn't find it useful. 'It looked like it was from a Google site. I didn't really look at [the results] properly – I didn't think they were relevant. I didn't like the way the results were presented.' She used the course search once to search for geography, but (not surprisingly) didn't get any results.

By contrast, P2 found the main search useful, using it to find the grades needed for a hypothetical subject choice. P3 and P4 did not use the main search facility.

P2, P3 and P4 all thought the course search box would be useful, but either didn't use or didn't recognise it.

Recommendation

Searching is a common activity on websites, so providing adequate facilities is important. Although most of the participants did not use the course search, when they were alerted to it they all said it would be useful. It may be helpful to make the course search more prominent on the home page, or locate it beneath the main search.

2.5   Menus and navigation

Whilst the participants ultimately worked out how to use the navigation, the different purposes of the top and side menus were not completely clear.

Participants were asked whether they understood the purpose of the menus towards the end of the session. P1, looking at the lefthand menu, hovered over 'Undergraduate' and said, 'would that be if I wanted to apply?' and then hovered over 'Postgraduate Taught' and said, 'would that be if I wanted to teach it?' Despite this confusion about the individual entries, she understood that the lefthand menu was 'just for this subject,' and the top menu was for the main site. The 'Our People' entry wasn't clear to her, however. 'Does that mean students or staff? Graduate school people who have passed?'

P2 thought the lefthand menu described 'student life – what students do, life as a student.' The menu across the top showed 'different ways of applying. Fees and funding – fees might vary for different courses? It might say something about bursaries.' She found the fact that 'Our People' was on both menus confusing, and thought the entries probably lead to different information, but she wasn't sure how it would be different. P2 said that she found the menus on the SALC site confusing in general, and that those on the main UoM site were much clearer and took you straight to things like grade requirements and funding, which were the things she was interested in.

P3 said the lefthand menu was 'more to tell you what it's about, what the course is about. How they teach you and stuff. At the top it's different stuff: how to apply, fees. The top menu is more about the whole university. Say I was a college student, that would help me to know each step. Where as this one [lefthand menu] is more about the course you want to find out about.'

P4 understood that 'the side menu takes you around the course you want to see – so, Archaeology. Across the top? That's the for whole website. Kind of different parts of the website. Is the difference clear? Kind of. I think with this one [lefthand], when I first clicked Undergraduate I thought it was going to take me back to the undergraduate pages, but when it didn't I realised it was all for Archaeology.'

Recommendation

The participants did appear to find the menus confusing, although their lack of familiarity with the subject area, and the fact that they were not in the process of applying to university, may have affected this. It seemed that they were able to work out how to use the menus as they interacted with the site. A big issue here was that the top menu was that the top menu was thought to link to the main University site. Using a different colour scheme to distinguish the two could help to address this.

When asked about the images on the right of the page `http://www.alc.manchester.ac.uk/subjects/music/`, one participant showed a preference for them, whilst the other three thought they served little purpose.

P1 said, 'I prefer the images on right. They are more colourful and catch your eye before you start reading the subheading.'

P3 said, 'I don't find the images eye catching. Perhaps the heading might be but not the picture. I'm more likely to use the lefthand menu.' P2 concurred with this view. P4 said, 'I think I'd probably use the lefthand menu. Are the pictures useful? Not really. Here there are only three. On the left there is so much more and it's more divided. That's the first place you look anyway – you don't really look to the right. Until you told me you could click on them I just thought the pictures were there for fun. I didn't think they were useful. I wouldn't have clicked on them.'

Recommendation

The images on the right may be redundant. Although participants expressed a desire for informative images on the site, they are not necessarily a useful replacement for or addition to a menu.

2.6   Consistency with the University of Manchester brand

P1, P2 and P4 thought the UoM and SALC sites looked clearly related. P3 said she didn't think the sites looked that similar, but she preferred that because it would be confusing otherwise. When comparing the two sites she noted that the UoM home page had more images, and the SALC site had more (too much) text. She liked the pictures on the UoM, which 'attract you - then afterwards you click on the information' and showed an overall preference for this layout.

P4 said, 'it's clear they are related – the colour schemes, the logos, the way it's laid out, the font size. You can tell it's the same [organisation]'. When asked if it mattered she said, 'Yes, because if you click on something and it takes you somewhere that looks totally different, you think, maybe I've clicked on the wrong thing. If they look the same you are more likely to think, I've used the right website'.

P1 said, 'they looked related, but the main one is less full. I'd rather come to this one [UoM] because I can straightaway see how to get around. They do fit together – they have the same logo and layout.'

P2 also concurred with this view. She said, 'they do look related but... if I did want to go here this is what I'd be looking for: A-Z. That's my position now, because I'm in high school. People in college might want to look for other stuff, about the University and stuff. I just want to know what I need to get in.'

Recommendation
The SALC site appears to be consistent with the UoM brand, which is what the users expect. The similarity of the sites can cause confusion, however: P3 thought the top menu was for the whole University, rather than the School, possibly because the colour scheme is the same. A different colour scheme would help to address this issue.

3   Focus Group

The focus group was conducted using an informal set of open questions, which led to additional conversation and questions as time went on. At any one time three participants were present in the focus group setting, while the other was in a one-to-one session in the user lab for the eye tracking and task completion. The following are the interpreted results of this focus group, and while a transcript is not available, the audio files are – please get in touch if you would like a copy of these files. The initial set of open questions were:

- What kind of information is useful to you / has been useful?

- What other University websites have you been to?

- Did you like them?

- What kind of sites do you normally surf?

- What kind of look should we have / do you like?

- Would social networking / Facebook Twitter provide you with better way of accessing information about Schools and Courses?

- Open chat about anything related.

The focus group itself looks at the kind of questions that would be useful for requirements definition, rather than those which look to the context of use (the role of the user study). They look at the kind of tools and sites prospective students might use to gain information and knowledge about their educational choices. It is interesting to note that while these students had social networking accounts including Facebook and Twitter, they stated that even if the course was recommended by their friends, it would not necessarily alter their viewpoint of whether to choose the course. The main motivating factor in choosing a course from recommendation seems to be the comments on The Student Room (`http://www.thestudentroom.co.uk/`). All students saw this as a trusted source and therefore valued the recommendations made for prospective courses and programmes of study.

When asked about the kinds of websites that the students thought were good or bad, they all immediately said that Loretto College had a very good website because it was to the point, the grade requirements were available on the front page, it was easy to navigate, and it had pictures first and then text. It also exposed the real events that were occurring within the School, meaning that prospective students could have a real understanding of the kinds of things that were happening, and build a coherent expectation of study. Conversely Stretford Grammar was picked out as a very bad website because the course requirements were hidden and there was too much text, a very bad navigation structure, and none of the events that were happening at the school were exposed to the general public. In this case the students also preferred content which had multiple headings and subheadings and was not in the form of a long list of paragraphs. They said that this allowed them to jump to the areas they thought were more important faster and not waste time searching

through content which may not apply to them or that they were not interested in. The main point about website quality and look and feel seems to be that students associate this with trust, quality and legitimacy, as well as helping them to easily find the information they need. But they would not see a quality website as a reason for choosing a course if that course was not right one for them, or if they didn't like the content.

Information finding and content searching were really important to the students. They were all familiar with Google and so expected to be able to search in a Google fashion. Indeed when asked if they bookmarked pages all said that they didn't (although some used pinterest) but instead preferred to use Google, and repeated Google searches to find information they needed. Reflecting on this it may be interesting to see if a clean Google interface to the information that the user requires would be more useful, and familiar, than the kinds of navigation structures we are currently producing. The kinds of sites that the students return to are those which relate to shopping, social networking, and information gathering, as well is that related to television and movies, specifically youTube and including real channels on youTube. They suggest that they mainly only look at video blogs (not textual ones). They do use Facebook and Twitter, but as we have already discussed, they prefer The Student Room for serious opinions on education. They also state that if they were made an offer to join a Facebook group based on an application to university they would do so.

Students seem to suggest that static photography was useful to the general look of the site but did not make them think of the courses or programs differently. Further, they felt that videos of 'talking heads' such as students, staff members, heads of School etc. would not influence them in making a decision for a particular program. They suggested that interactive content that is actually related to the course subject or program they would be studying would be more useful. Clarifying, this interactive content would not necessarily be something they needed to be involved in. but would be something different to a staff member just talking at them; they gave the example of a neuroscience lecture which would have animation of the brain as opposed to somebody just talking about its functionality. They were looking for fun interactivity via animation and diagrams. A list of possible videos to convey course information might be: the history of the work, videos explaining aspects of the course, examples of problems, and problems which could be solved. These were seen as being important to them in their decision-making process. They also suggested that clips of videos of the way that lectures, seminars, tutorials, etc. were conducted would have more influence on them selecting a program than would a student talking to camera. They also suggested that if a website was badly designed but provided this kind of content, whilst another website was well-designed but didn't provide this kind of content, they would more likely go with the badly designed website but with good video content.

When asked what kinds of things the students were looking for they listed (in this order): courses, funding, grades, and student life, with the strongest focus on courses and grades. When asked further about research and whether research was useful the students initially said that it was not. However, when it was explained that research directly led to teaching, and given the example that Professor Steve

Furber invented the ARM processor which is in 70 to 80% of all mobile devices and that also Steve Furber is working just down the corridor and teaches students everyday, to contrast with a school where the teaching may be very good but you would not be taught by someone research active, the students changed their mind and said that they would rather be taught by a researcher. It seems that, by making an explicit link between research and teaching, the research message can be conveyed and used as a quality indicator of the teaching the students would expect.

In conclusion, students are looking for authentic indicators of the student experience. What will it actually be like in their lectures, seminars, tutorials? What will student life really be like? What kind of people (staff and students) would they encounter? And how will they be interacted with both in a social and academic environment? The graphic design of the website is mainly used as an indicator of quality and trust, and also as an indicator of the kind of effort that staff will put into the student, the logic being if we can't be bothered with a good website we are unlikely to be bothered with good learning experiences. In addition, a well-designed website and a well structured website accounts for good ambient findability, but we may need to think again about the kinds of navigation structures applied as most students are simply more comfortable with the Google interface than the standard navigational interface; or bookmarks which were created at a time when searching was not so popular and serendipitous discovery through browsing was more useful. Indeed, it may also be interesting to create a number of 'Walden pathways', as set trails through certain information or resources such that the user can have all the information presented to them without having to do much navigation. Finally, social networking such as Facebook and Twitter are useful ways of interacting, and indeed students do use the social networking sites. Although recommendations on these networks would not necessarily influence students to take or apply for a particular course/programme, they would appreciate being part of a Facebook group once they had applied, and this may very well change the nature of the ranking they give to the University in their final UCAS decision.

Summary

The main conclusions from the user study and the focus group can be summarised as follows:

- Prospective students' top priority is being able to find accurate details about specific degree courses, including information about how they will be taught, and entry requirements.

- A good quality website is not sufficient in itself, but it helps to build trust.

- Prospective students do not read large blocks of text: it should be broken up into smaller chunks with links to each item of information.

- Multimedia content can improve the look and feel of a website, and can draw prospective students in, but it is most effective when it adds value. Images and videos should tell the students something about life at the university, and what to expect when they arrive.

A priority for SALC should be making course information more prominent and accessible. If students are not able to find it on the SALC pages it may reduce their trust in the site. On pages that contain large amounts of text, breaking up the information and linking to it from the top of the page would make it much easier to navigate. Any future move to provide multimedia content should focus on the 'real' student experience, rather than a specifically produced 'artificial' version.

Appendix A: Details of participants

Four students from the Manchester Youth Forum took part. All were culturally Muslim and female; three were aged 16 and are in the process of deciding on sixth form colleges, while another was 17 and was in the process of deciding on Universities.

P1 was 16 and wanted to study teaching or geography at university.

P2 was 16 and planned to study A-levels in English language, biology, chemistry, sociology and psychology. At university she plans to study English language and sociology or biology.

P3 was 16 and planned to study maths, chemistry, biology and psychology at A-level.

P4 was 17 and studying A-levels in chemistry, biology, psychology and philosophy. She was applying to study medicine or neuroscience at university.

Appendix B: Tasks and questions

This section documents the tasks and questions that were used to guide the user evaluation.

3.1   Task-based scenarios

In the first part of the user study, participants were asked to imagine themselves to be in a number of scenarios, and complete a number of directed tasks.

Task 1: *You are currently studying [A-levels specific to the person] A-levels and want to continue your studies. Find what suitable courses are available and what grades are required to study. Can you find out what course units you could study and what study abroad options would be available to you as an Undergraduate student?*

Task 2: *You are a 17 year old A-level student interested in studying for a BA [A subject of their choosing] at The University of Manchester. Using the website, can you locate the course information, find the modules you would study in year 1 and 2 and find details of any societies that may be available for you to join. Once you have done this, let us assume that you have been offered a conditional place on the programme. Use the website to find out what you need to do next.*

Task 3: *You are an A-level student interested in studying for a BA [A subject of their choosing] at The University of Manchester. Using the website, can you locate the career or employment opportunities / employability information.*

Task 4: *You are an A-level student interested in studying for a BA [A subject of their choosing] at The University of Manchester. Using the website, can you locate the teaching and learning information (how you will be taught) on your course.*

Task 5: *You are an A-level student interested in studying for a BA [A subject of their choosing] at The University of Manchester. Look around the website; what information can't you find that you would like to?*

3.2   Direct questions

After completing the tasks, the participants were asked a number of questions about the structure and layout of the site.

Question 1: *Our website employs both horizontal navigation (header tabs) and the more conventional left-hand side navigation. What are your thoughts on this? Is the purpose of each method of navigation clear?*

Question 2: *The website contains landing pages that offer both static and dynamic feature images. We would like to know which you prefer: The static version: `http://www.alc.manchester.ac.uk/subjects/Archaeology/`; The dynamic version: `http://www.alc.manchester.ac.uk/subjects/englishamericanstudies/`*

Question 3: *On the following page: http://www.alc.manchester.ac.uk/subjects/music/ - Our website uses the right-hand column to visually advertise certain pages that exist within the section. These pages are also accessible from the navigation options on the left-hand side. What are your thoughts on this?*

Question 4: *Each page within the website offers a 'Course search' box on the right-hand side. How useful do you think this feature is in the context of the website?*

Question 5: *When navigating from the Central University of Manchester website: http://www.manchester.ac.uk/ to the School website: http://www.alc.manchester.ac.uk/ - does the look and feel of the School website still communicate a consistent brand and make you feel that you are still is the wider context of The University of Manchester, and does this matter to you?*

Question 6: *What are you general thoughts on the look and feel of the School of Arts, Languages and Cultures website?*