
Jisc change agents' network

Case study

Student Digital Ambassadors for Digital Literacy at London School of Economics

Summary

Student Ambassadors for Digital Literacy (SADL) is a programme coordinated by Learning Technology and Innovation and open to LSE undergraduate students. It has been running since 2013, when it started as a pilot in two academic departments. LSE is a specialist social science institution, research led with a relatively small undergraduate population (approximately 4500 students). Students study across the social sciences in quantitative subjects such as economics, maths and statistics, and qualitative subjects such as social policy, international history and anthropology. The student population is highly international and LSE has an excellent rating for graduate employment. LSE Students Union offer support and promote SADL which aims to develop students digital literacies, but provides an opportunity to understand more about what their needs might be.

Earlier research at LSE suggested that students had relatively few opportunities to develop their digital and information literacies, either as part of their course of study or as an extra curricular activity. Attendance at optional workshops run by the Library had historically been very low, and academic staff made assumptions that students were already 'tech savvy'. The SADL programme has been an attempt to plug the 'digital skills' crisis identified most recently in a House of Lords report.¹ In order to make it sustainable and relevant to students' actual needs, it has operated as a staff student partnership from the outset. It runs as a year long programme for up to 50 students to develop students capabilities around finding and evaluating information, using digital tools for academic practices, managing and sharing information and reflecting on their digital identity. The workshops are taught in a highly interactive way and alongside this students work on a group project to consider the role of technology in learning at LSE. SADL encourages students on the programme to act as peer support for others in their department. Students who complete the programme have the option to apply to become a 'Senior Ambassador' where they help to facilitate the workshops, supervise a group project and provide invaluable feedback to the teaching team. Three evaluation studies have been carried out each year the

¹ House of Lords: Science and Technology Committee. (June 2016) Digital Skills Report.
<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201617/cmselect/cmsctech/270/27002.htm>

programme has been modified based on this feedback. The team are keen to develop the peer support aspects to enable the skills to be cascaded to students outside the programme, however there is also an important community learning aspect to being part of this programme, which we are keen to maintain. Providing students (and staff) with enough guidance and support, but also helping to empower them as change agents, is an important balance we are striving to achieve within the programme.

How students and staff are working in partnership

The interactive nature of the workshops, where staff teach some aspect of digital literacy, but are keen for students to share their ideas and experiences lies at the heart of the SADL model. Student ambassadors are encouraged to discuss their approaches to using technology in their daily life and learn lessons that can be applied to academic study and the workplace. Senior Ambassadors are part of the SADL teaching team so help to shape the content of the workshops and deliver some aspects, to bridge the gap between staff and students. We measure the impact of the programme through an evaluation which considers how students digital skills have developed over time, but also are aware through interviews that leadership, collaboration and team working skills are gained through the programme. The opportunities to gain skills valued by employers are a key motivation to students. They are rewarded with a statement on their Personal Development record and additional activities such as blogging to reflect on what they have learnt, earn them Amazon vouchers. The Students Union are highly supportive of the programme and help with promotion and recruitment, as well as participating in the workshops.

Student partnership in action

SADL builds a deeper level of engagement with students than is possible during one off workshops. It also provides a supportive community where students can share their current digital practices, learn about new tools and technologies and develop a range of skills including digital literacies. Students from across LSE departments have an opportunity to reflect on disciplinary differences and to discuss their ideas with staff. Technology is used in the workshops but group work, discussions and using creative techniques are very important to learning in a collaborative way. The model is resource intensive and does not seek to reach large groups of students, but through building this trust and a learning community we have learnt about how better to support all students at LSE. We have capped the programme at 50 students to build a learning community and hold workshops for no more than 20 students at a time. The main challenges are to provide students with guidance and support to develop as peer mentors, so they can spread our message to others. This means helping the Ambassadors to develop their confidence and skills to become leaders and agents of change.

Impact and benefits

SADL's reach and impact on the students who have taken part in the programme and in particular, those who have acted as Senior Ambassadors is significant. They develop digital skills but also value the non-technical skills they gain such as leadership, presentation skills and team working. The benefits to staff for being involved in a collaborative project are the deeper level of understanding of student needs and the experience of teaching different types of interactive sessions with staff from other teams. SADL changes the dynamics of the relationship between staff and students, where the two can learn together, and through this partnership staff say they better understand the students' needs.

Student ambassadors and champions are valuable in any university or school, for what you can learn from them. If those students can act as peer mentors then the model becomes sustainable and scalable.

Key points and lessons learned

Over the course of 3 years we have learnt a lot about what motivates students to get involved in this type of programme, what rewards they might want, and how challenging building a network of peer support can be. We have learnt that students are motivated by many different things, but digital literacies are valued by students in their personal, professional and academic lives. We believe that through SADL students are developing skills that will benefit them beyond higher education in 'the real world'. Technology is an integral part to students' lives and understanding how to use it effectively is something many students value. Staff also have much to learn from working in partnership with students, and the benefits are significant to both groups.

Looking to the future

The programme is being reviewed in terms of the most appropriate content. Students request more advanced digital skills and had expectations that the programme might include a wider understanding of tools such as Excel, or even coding skills. We hope to sustain the programme, but focus on how we can create greater opportunities to enhance the peer mentor aspects of the SADL. Discussions with colleagues in IT and in the Students Union are ongoing on these issues.

More information

For more information about SADL visit the SADL blog: <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/lseadl> or speak to the Programme Manager Dr Jane Secker, Copyright and Digital Literacy Advisor, LSE. Email: j.secker@lse.ac.uk