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### **Promoting Independent Language Learning Cross-Campus at the University of Leeds through a Self-Access Area**

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## **Promoting Independent Language Learning Cross-Campus at the University of Leeds through a Self-Access Area**

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The Language Centre at the University of Leeds concentrates on the full range of language training and preparation courses, both for pre-sessional and for current university students. These courses relate both to the learning of English and of foreign languages.

The Self-Access Area constitutes the Language Centre's resource library for language learning materials and supports learners on Language Centre and other modern language courses, as well as independent language learners from across the university. Catering for approximately 11,000 users, the Self-Access Area opens, on average, for 46 hours per week, with evening and Saturday opening times during term time and exam weeks. Among the services that the Self-Access Area provides are a wide range of language learning resources in print and various audiovisual formats, induction tours, an up-to-date online library catalogue and a social media presence. As part of the Language Centre, the Self-Access Area team is connected with staff and students across the university. The service also offers a range of opportunities which encourage human interaction both amongst language learners and between learners and specialists. It also acts as a flexible social and study space.

The main initiatives or valuable 'accessories' for language learning to be discussed in this brief overview are

- Language learning advising
- Language exchange
- Conversation sessions

### **Language Learning Advising**

An important member of the Self-Access Area team is the Language Learning Adviser, Jadzia Terlecka, who helps users with anything related to language learning. This includes confidential advice, confidence-building and training sessions on different aspects of language learning. Students can book

appointments with her, or drop in during her advising times, which are between 11am and 5pm on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays.

Coming from a teaching background herself, she liaises with teaching staff and other partners within the university and develops learning materials to be used as part of Self-Access Area induction sessions and workshops. She also delivers a range of workshops on independent learning, which form a regular part of English Language courses taught in the Language Centre.

### **Language Exchange**

The Language Exchange Scheme seeks to connect native and non-native speakers of any particular language with the joint aims of achieving additional practice and intercultural exchange.

Currently, language learners find their exchange partners through a contact folder held in the Self-Access Area, and arrange their own meetings. Once a year the Self-Access Area team arrange social meetings for potential exchange partners to meet in an informal setting. Many successful exchange partnerships have been formed as a result of these meetings, although only participant numbers are consistently monitored.

In the future, the Language Exchange is envisaged to be made available through an online network similar to online discussion forums, as well as face-to-face or using Skype. Several UK Language Centres have already been successful with this.

### **Conversation Sessions**

The Language Exchange is very popular throughout the year, but since it sometimes takes a while to find an exchange partner, the Self-Access Area introduced Conversation Sessions in the spring of 2013. These are 15-minute sessions with a volunteer, offering an opportunity to have a chat, discuss grammar or do exercises in the learner's target language. Volunteers, primarily students, are not expected to act as teachers; they are expert speakers of their native language and, as such, can provide the opportunity for learners to talk. The conversation sessions are popular and new volunteers sign up regularly, to help others, and also to develop new skills themselves, such as interpersonal and listening skills. Volunteers have also reported that by volunteering they learned about other

cultures, made new friends, gained confidence and enhanced their mentoring skills.

### **Discovery Themes**

With its regular activities, the Self-Access Area supports the University of Leeds' Curriculum Enhancement project (<http://curriculum.leeds.ac.uk/>).

This recently-released project allows students to enhance their learning through credit-bearing modules that explore specific subjects, issues or skills that lie outside their primary study choice. This way, students can broaden their knowledge and experience beyond their key subject area, meet students from other disciplines and develop a range of new skills.

The Self-Access Area, in particular, supports students who choose the Discovery Theme of 'Languages and Intercultural Understanding'. Modules under this theme focus on topics such as learning a foreign language, the functions of language, translation and communication in a multilingual world, and how literature, films and theatre can offer insights into other societies and cultures (<http://curriculum.leeds.ac.uk/broadening/broadening-strands>).

The Self-Access Area already has a range of materials which support cultural insights, for example, a large film library and a collection of foreign language short stories and novels, and staff are currently developing small poetry collections in German, French and Spanish.

### **Links within the University**

Self-Access Area staff members recognise the importance of close working relationships and make an effort to develop and maintain these with departments across the university campus. Some members of the Self-Access Area team and Language Centre work in other university departments as well as in the Language Centre, which gives us immediate access to a range of contacts.

The Self-Access Area team also work closely with the Language Centre's technical team, for example, when developing new materials. A MOOC is currently being developed in cooperation with the technical team and the Business School. If it is accepted, it will be available through the FutureLearn platform in 2014.

The Self-Access Area team is constantly developing new relationships within the university, whilst maintaining existing ones with partners like the

Business School and the Leeds University Union. For example, language learners can take advantage of an international students club and a conversation club for learners of English, as well as a variety of Leeds University Union clubs and societies that bring together native speakers and language learners.

Since September 2012, the Self-Access Area has a stall at the quarterly New Staff Information Fair, an event that welcomes new starters to the university. This way a wide variety of staff members can be reached, who will often come and join the Self-Access Area, and also share the information about the service both with colleagues and students.

### **Staff Training and Development**

In order to be able to cater effectively for users' needs, the Self-Access Area Manager, Carolin Schneider, is keen on staff training and development. Any new counter assistant who deals with enquiries is assigned a buddy who is already working in the Self-Access Area, to reassure them and help them become a fully-trained and integrated team member.

Most of the regular staff training focuses on staff-user interaction, and takes place whenever staff need to be informed or reminded about customer care standards, stock matters and innovations, and apply to both experienced and new staff members. As the majority of counter assistants are, or have been, international students or language students themselves, they can share their own experiences and expertise with users, which add to customer engagement and satisfaction.

### **Find out More**

To find out more, visit:

[http://www.leeds.ac.uk/arts/info/20056/language\\_centre/](http://www.leeds.ac.uk/arts/info/20056/language_centre/)

<http://tinyurl.com/saaopac>

<https://www.diigo.com/profile/saaleedsuni>

To follow the Language Centre on social media, visit:

<http://twitter.com/LeedsLangCentre>

<http://www.facebook.com/LeedsLangCentre>

<https://foursquare.com/LeedsLangCentre>

Notes on the contributor

Carolin Schneider manages the Language Centre's Self-Access Area at the University of Leeds. She is a chartered librarian and her current research interests include languages, new technologies, social networking and how librarians and libraries can help people achieve what they need and want. Email Carolin: [C.Schneider@leeds.ac.uk](mailto:C.Schneider@leeds.ac.uk)