

# Library Lounge: Virtual Study Sessions (VSS) - Past, Present, Future

## Staff Training Week Presentation - January 2022

---

*Presented by: Briony Willis, Jessica Biondo, Darcy Spiller*

---

In today's session we will be discussing the origins of the VSS, why we do it, where we are now with a little update on our exciting news, and where we plan to take the service in the future. We also have a Q&A session at the end and will be happy to answer any of your questions about the service.

---

### Origins

The initial idea for these sessions came from a presentation Lynsey attended at the Customer Service UK Group conference in November 2020 by the University of Sheffield.

The University of Sheffield Virtual Library Commons held "Come together, Write now" sessions. These were twice weekly Mondays and Wednesdays and hosted via Blackboard. At that point they had done 96 sessions, 520 attendees (average 5 students per session).

Discussions of doing something similar then took place between Library Staff, as well as Lynsey and Lorna meeting with one of the key Library Staff from the University of Sheffield to ask further questions following on from Sheffield's initial presentation.

We then submitted our proposal of hosting and moderating/ facilitating our own Virtual Study Sessions under the branding of the Library Lounge, with our main aim of building community and offering support to students who were unable to visit the library.

---

### Why VSS?

We became increasingly aware of student isolation during the pandemic and were aware that not all students were able to visit the physical library. This being the case group study options were not available in person, so we needed to find another way for Library staff to support our students.

We wanted to re-create the physical library space using a virtual platform, so that students have a sense of 'community' where they can see that they are studying alongside others. Knowing that they can talk to each other in the chat publicly or chat directly to the moderators of the session(s).

We have some students joining the sessions who are based in different countries. Either because they are distance learners, or they have not been able to travel back to the UK due to the pandemic. So, we wanted to ensure we are meeting the needs of students in these far-flung places.

Our students often meet others at the session who are either of a similar status as themselves e.g. PhD, or who are from the same course or department as themselves.

Also, this is another way for us to reach out to students and engage with them. We have found that the chat function in the Virtual Study Session has been another route for us to receive and respond to library enquiries from attendees during the session(s).

---

## What are Virtual Study Sessions?

- Online study sessions facilitated by Library staff
- Sessions run on Zoom
- 2 hours long
- Introduction at start, break in middle, sum up at end
- Students study solo, use Chat for any queries

The library staff member acts as a moderator/ facilitator in the session, introducing the format of the session, and introducing themselves and encouraging attendees to introduce themselves as well as what coursework they plan to work on during the session. Usually there are two staff members on a session, with one acting as a co-host in case the host has technology difficulties (such as an unstable Wi-Fi connection).

### The sessions take the format of:

Library staff introducing the session which involves: what the purpose of the sessions are; the 'housekeeping' of turning the cameras and mics on and off, questions that can be asked through the chat facility, and the session slide of the library going up during the independent studying; and encouraging attendees to introduce themselves as well as talk about their plans for the session.

Break in the middle which involves: finding out how attendees have got on with the coursework/ goals they have set themselves during the first half of the sessions and what they plan to do during the second half. Also sometimes talking about other non-study related things such as the weather, ways to de-stress such as yoga, walking, and holidays.

End which involves: finding out how attendees have progressed with the last half of the session, thanking them for their attendance, and putting the survey link in the chat and encouraging them to complete it. Attendees also get sent a post-session email which includes lots of useful links, as well as the survey link and the booking link to future virtual study sessions.

During the study session we display a 'background slide' whilst attendees are working on their coursework or exam revision with their cameras and mics off. We explain to them during the introduction that we will be putting up a slide of the library to give them a sense of feeling there (albeit virtually).

---

## When are VSS run?

Sessions are advertised on the DAT booking system. Once a student books onto one of the sessions, we send out the Zoom link to them.

Originally the sessions were run every Tuesday and Thursday in the afternoons for 2 hours. However, in response to our survey feedback, we now have our two sessions at different times of day, allowing our internationally based students to join at a more convenient time to them. Our Tuesday sessions are in the afternoon 2pm – 4pm and our Thursday sessions are in the morning 10am – 12noon.

---

## Who attends VSS?

I made use of a spreadsheet with the data we are collecting from the beginning of this journey. Basically, for every session, we take a note of the number of attendees, name, email address and their studies/sector.

What comes out quite immediately from this document is that, if at the beginning the users who attended were probably just curious about this service, with time, most of them become our regulars.

The general number of the attendees is not changed that much from the beginning, even if has been recorded an increase in the past couple of months – this is probably following the exam session trend or the covid trend. We are talking about 10/12 attendees per session, but sometimes can be 2 and sometimes 15, it really depends.

But the important data to highlight is that, while we were delivering this service, a community has been built: it was good to see how our regulars interact with each other, sharing their knowledge and/or tips, helping each other – this is the intrinsic aim of VSS: connect people, help people, especially in this current situation due to COVID-19, where people feel disconnected and alone. Another document I have analysed for this presentation is the report based on the survey we asked the attendees to do for us. The report is from December 2021 and we have got 58 responses.

The first question of the survey was “how did you hear about the Virtual Study session?”. 37 people out of 58 said they hear about VSS through email. This apparently minor fact is actually quite interesting if we look at the future. Because one of our future goals is to reach many more people and to do so, we were thinking to invest in new forms of advertising. For this reason, I think it would be interesting to see how and if this data is going to change in the future.

This is what we are doing at the moment: we are elaborating the data, we are coming out with new ideas to improve the service.

---

## Regular VSS attendee testimonials

### [Appendix 1 – VSS Attendee 2 Testimonial](#)

---

## Response & Feedback: What do students like about the Virtual Study Sessions?

Since sending out the survey at the end of each session from the middle of April (when the sessions began), we have received 36 survey responses. We have been blown away by the quality, detail, and positivity of these responses from attendees. Here are some of these responses. 100% of all respondents reported finding these sessions useful and that they would study with us virtually again.

We also received verbal feedback from attendees during the sessions, with attendees stating that:

*It reduced feelings of isolation (from either living alone, not being able to travel to the UK, or feeling like this was a safer alternative to studying in the physical library);*

Others mentioned *being able to set aside specific coursework for them to primarily work on during the session*, thereby providing themselves with an achievable and measurable goal.

Staff engagement from other parts of the university has been notable too. For example, we helped an Education course start their first Virtual Study Sessions for their Postgraduate taught masters students. And as a result we received the following response from the course leader: *'It is good to see that 10 students joined, this suggests that they could see value in this kind of session. Thank you again for running this with us, I think it is the kind of thing we will be looking to do again next year.'*

---

## More feedback – we're great!

The previous slide comes from the last Training week session. It shows some great feedbacks based on a survey we did last April 2021. At that time we've got 36 responses, all of them very positive.

Since the last report, we got a more updated survey, dated December 2021. First data to highlight: the response from the attendees didn't change. The number of participants in the survey is higher this time (58 against 36), but the response is again very positive. The 100% of them finds the VSS useful and at the question "Will you study with us virtually again?", 100% said yes.

---

## We're so great but how can we be better?

- "What could we do to improve the sessions?"
- "How long would you like the sessions to be?"
- Some hints for the future

The same survey, other data to be analyzed.

This time we also asked, "What could we do to improve the sessions?". We have got two different responses: around the 50% of them said nothing, they are already great, and the other 50% asked for longer sessions and/or more days. One asked for music during the session and another one for activities during the sessions.

Also, we asked, "How long would you like the session to be?" and again half of them, presumably the same half that was happy with the current pattern, said that 2h were fine. On the contrary, the other 50% is divided between 3 or 4 hours long sessions.

This is certainly an important suggestion we have to think about in the future.

---

## Regular VSS attendee testimonials

[Appendix 2 – VSS Attendee 1 Testimonial](#)

---

## Scholarship – prize – all the money

Another important feedback comes from the University.

To talk about this scholarship, I have emailed Lorna McNally asking her for more information about this award. Why did we apply? Who took the decision? How? She kindly shared with us the “backstage” of this project.

It was July 2021 when arrived an email from STEP – Strathclyde’s Teaching Excellence program, saying that the Learning and Teaching development team wanted to recognise and celebrate all the hard work that has taken place over the past 18 months. They wanted to hear the stories of the practices we have developed and how they have been successful (or not!) in supporting our students through the pandemic.

A few people had the idea to apply for this scholarship but the first was Elaine Blaxter. So they decide to proceed and to submit two entries: one for the Library Lounge and one for the Virtual study session. To do so, Lorna drafted the submissions based on documents others Lorna Gilkison and Lynsey Sampson had already written so it was very much a whole team effort.

And, we won!

And is thanks to all the positive feedbacks, all the amazing support from the staff who volunteer in the past months, that we can continue to think about this service with more determination and inspiration.

---

## The Award – Library Team

### [Appendix 3 – Details of our Award Submission and Judges Comments](#)

---

## VSS Future Plans

Back at our last session in August we projected our Future Plans as ‘wanting to run until the end of August’ and ‘hopefully carrying on into September’ if we could manage it. (Nailed it!)

We also wanted to review the option of targeting specific sessions for specific groups.

In a relatively short period of time, these plans have mostly been fulfilled and now we are looking to the future again.

---

## VSS Future Plans Cont....

As Jessica mentioned we were lucky enough to win the Scholarship project fund. This was a prize of £500 and we recently met as a team to discuss how this resource would be best utilised.

After much discussion it was felt that there are two main directions that we wanted the service to go in, one being ‘Sharing our Knowledge’ and the other ‘Expanding our Service’.

---

## VSS Sharing our Knowledge

For our ‘Sharing our Knowledge’ element we hope to educate other external information professionals by creating a VSS Toolkit that they can use, so they can potentially create a similar service in their own libraries.

Once the toolkit has been created, we intend to advertise it by presenting it at an appropriate conference or two.

We are hopeful that we can use a small portion of the funding to allow one of our regular VSS attendees to come and talk at one of these conferences and give a student's perspective on the service.

We also aim to write a small piece about it in the CILIP 'Information Professional' magazine.

Additionally, we plan to make the toolkit openly available via the library's institutional repository Strathprints, so anyone can use it as a resource should they wish to.

---

## VSS Expanding our Services

The 'Expanding our Service' objective is less about holding additional or extended sessions (although we are hopeful that will come in time) and more about marketing the service in a more professional way.

Our aim is to establish it in the student psyche and hopefully gain more users of the service through appropriate advertising.

We are still to establish exactly what we want to do in that respect but amongst other things there has been talk of branded pencils... just sayin'.

Also, under our 'Expanding our Service' banner we've had some suggestions from the participants on how they would like the service to evolve.

For example, one of our regular participants would like us to investigate the possibility of having a breakout room in a couple of scheduled sessions, allowing the participants to peer review/proofread each other's work, giving them a chance to help each other out on an informal basis and make sure the work they are handing in to their supervisors is correct.

Other suggestions are to make the sessions longer, or extend breaks to allow for chatting, so they can get to know their study buddies a bit better.

So, as you can see the participants are invested in this service and would like to see it developed further as well.

---

## VSS We Need You!!

Further down the line, we would like to hold more sessions. As Jessica mentioned, we have had a good number of students taking part, however, in order for us to expand we are hoping to call upon your kindness again and ask for your help.

Should you wish to help us moderate any of these sessions, there's a form you can fill out which I've shared in the Chat section.

Involvement is minimal and just requires a wee bit of time moderating the chat at the beginning, break, and end of each 2-hour session.

As Briony mentioned we usually work in pairs to share the load, and during the session the staff members can get on with their own work with the VSS session continuing in the background.

It is a great way to engage directly with our students and one which I find very rewarding!

## VSS Q&A

Thank you for coming to our presentation today, hopefully we've given you a better idea of what the service is and where we would like to take it, and we hope you'd like to help us do that.

It's now time for our Q&A session, so if you have any questions, we'd be happy to answer them.

[Appendix 4 – Standout Questions from the Q&A](#)

## Appendix 1 – VSS Attendee 2 Testimonial

*Lynsey Sampson*

00:02- Okay hello, we are welcomed by one of our regular attendees to our library lounge virtual study sessions who will be talking about her experiences of attending these sessions. Hello, what is your name?

*Zi Yang*

00:16- My name is Zi. I'm a final year PhD student from the school of law.

*Lynsey Sampson*

00:22- Okay excellent thanks very much Zi. So, to start with, I've got the initial question, which is why did you initially sign up for the virtual study sessions?

*Zi Yang*

00:34- I heard about the sessions through the university email newsletter and then when I was in the library, I also saw the advertising again. And the library has always been a nice place to study for me so out of curiosity I decided to sign up and try the sessions, I just want to know how it's gonna work out, yeah.

*Lynsey Sampson*

00:58- hmm so it's one of these things where you associated the library with a really good place to study and you're curious as to what these sessions would involve?

*Zi Yang*

01:06- Yes, exactly.

*Lynsey Sampson*

01:08- Okay, thank you and what did you hope to get out of the sessions before you joined a session. What were your initial expectations?

*Zi Yang*

01:16- I want to be more productive. So after more than one year working at home, I feel a bit isolated from everyone else and do not progress as much I would love to with my PhD. So, I thought at least these two-hour sessions will be a time for me to just study and not be distracted by other things, and by step, I can get there, eventually.

*Lynsey Sampson*

01:45- Okay, and that sounds like really good reasons why you came along to the sessions and then, what did you get out of the sessions once you started attending the sessions?

*Zi Yang*

01:57- I have a really good experience with the sessions first. The library study session is a regular channel, where I come in and study. Setting up this routine is crucial for a PhD. When I have days, I feel lazy and don't want to do anything, now I realize I already signed up and I made a commitment, so I just get out of bed and start writing. So, it's quick and secondly, it is a great peer support platform.



I was working on an article and the librarian Lynsey and another PhD student Pia gave me great support and advice to help me go through a lot of problems I had with the article, so I couldn't be more grateful, for their support.

*Lynsey Sampson*

02:52- that's great thank you very much for that and it's good to hear the positive reasons why you got a lot of these sessions, once you started attending so thank you Zi. Finally is there anything else you'd like to say about the sessions?

*Zi Yang*

03:08- I think it's a great channel for peer support and for study and I wish we can continue doing this and I want more students to come in and try, maybe it's also for you.

*Lynsey Sampson*

03:22- Yes, yes, definitely it would be great to have lots more students and hopefully continue these sessions. So finally, Zi, thanks for joining us to talk about your experiences as a regular attendee at the library lounge virtual study sessions it's very much appreciated, thank you.

*Zi Yang*

03:40- Thank you as well.

## Appendix 2 – VSS Attendee 1 Testimonial

*Lynsey Sampson*

00:03- Okay hello, we are welcomed by one of our regular attendees to our library lounge virtual study sessions, who will be talking about her experiences of attending these sessions. Hello, what's your name.

*Pia Singh*

00:16- Pia Singh.

*Lynsey Sampson*

00:17- Thanks Pia, and what year are you in?

*Pia Singh*

00:20- I'm a year 1 PhD student in Education.

*Lynsey Sampson*

00:23- Okay, so you're studying education and okay so to start with I'll be asking you, just now my first question, which is why did you initially sign up for the virtual study sessions?

*Pia Singh*

00:35- Because they are more accessible for types of students to engage with the library staff and the colleagues in other locations as well, I managed to meet people who were also in education who are doing research into something different, and the whole idea of this one is that if you can't travel to the library, we are not spending time thinking, how are we going to get there, we actually have a virtual platform where we can get support and access to resources.

*Lynsey Sampson*

01:05- Excellent Thank you very much, and what did you hope to get out of the sessions, when you first started them.

*Pia Singh*

01:12- I was looking for a more inclusive workplace, which will, which is at the moment is unable to access because of the travel and the Covid and everything. But it made it more accessible, that I can speak to other people, and I can share what I'm working on and if I'm struggling, I can see how other people are tackling with it and gaining from other people's experiences, because some people are far ahead in this journey, so when you are stuck you see it as normal so don't worry about it don't give up. So, kind of expects otherwise if you're working on your own you will just lose the confidence and get disheartened but this provides a platform where everyone is encouraging you and motivating you and saying that you are on the right track, you will get there, eventually.

*Lynsey Sampson*

02:02- So it's all about encouragement and motivation.

*Pia Singh*

02:04- Yeah and in a way to actually push on with your work by seeing the others are doing the same thing.

*Lynsey Sampson*

02:09- Excellent and after attending a number of the sessions, because you're one of our regulars and what did you get out of the sessions after attending them did this change from the previous question I asked?

*Pia Singh*

02:25- The biggest one I have is I was used to like Okay, and when they do the study in a big chunk then I'll take a break in the evening. I ignored, sometimes I need to actually include the exercise part during the day after attending the sessions and hearing from other people that when you're taking the lunch break, you should actually do yoga or some kind of other exercise, which actually stimulates your brain. So, started doing that, along with other things which I was doing so, it has actually made me more reflective about what I was doing and started making me think that it's Okay, sometimes to take a break and pause yourself and recreate your learning environment after that does that make sense.

*Lynsey Sampson*

03:13- Yes, yes, definitely. Thank you very much, and finally, is there anything else you'd like to say about the sessions?

*Pia Singh*

03:22- They are quite amazing, and we need them more often and I was thinking if it could be, it could be like if we attended 10 sessions of this, that could actually have the possibility for students to get a credit, the PG also to because then students will have more engagement because we are developing our social skills. The biggest skill we develop is that if someone else is talking, we listen to them and we are developing the skills to actually boost our confidence, to be positive and be supportive. Those are the social skills we need for a PGR certificate competencies, so it will be great if a certain number of sessions 10 hours attended is equal to one credit, I think most students will actually engage with it, and the second thing is we need to have more advertising to them that everyone is aware, and one last thing I would like is how about, we have a session long session where someone actually who works in the writing or anything specific like that is also available so we can actually focus on a big chunk of writing during that time. Okay, facilitating to say longer writing session like one Sunday of the month, or a one day of the week, something like that.

*Lynsey Sampson*

04:45- Okay that's great Thank you very much for these suggestions and I really appreciate you coming along and joining us to talk about your experiences as a regular attendee at the library loans virtual study sessions. It is very much appreciated.

*Pia Singh*

05:00- Thank you for organising it.

*Lynsey Sampson*

05:02- Aw Thank you and I'll just stop the recording.

*Pia Singh*

05:07- Thank you.

## Appendix 3 – Details of our Award Submission and Judges Comments

### ADMIN & PROFESSIONAL SERVICES - AWARD

LORNA GILKISON, KIRSTEN WATSON, LYNSEY SAMPSON, ALAN MORRISON, ALASDAIR STEWART, BRIONY WILLIS, DARCY SPILLER, LIZ SCOTT, FIONA TINTO, JEAN KIDD, JENNIFER GRAY (STUDENT AMBASSADOR), JESSICA BIONDO, KAREN VEITCH, SARAH KEVILL, GILLIAN ANDERSON (LIBRARY) - SUBMITTED BY LORNA MCNALLY

In April 2021 the Library initiated Virtual Study Sessions (VSS) via Zoom. The main aim was to build community and offer support to students who couldn't physically visit the Library and wanted some Library "vibes". Students had told us that they were feeling isolated and lonely, and we hoped to build a community where they can pop in and feel supported while they are studying. Initially, the VSS were offered to support students during the exam diet, but soon developed into a regular offering, catering for all students, appealing in particular to PhD and Masters students. The sessions have attracted many students who are based overseas and therefore couldn't attend the Library for study even though it has been open since August 2020. Sessions have run throughout the summer 2021 and are planned to continue in the new academic year.

Two 2-hour sessions are offered each week. The first 5 minutes of each session is a general welcome and discussion, including an explanation of the format and brief comments from each attendee about what they hope to achieve. Students then turn off their cameras and microphones and get on with studying. During this part of the session, a slide is displayed explaining that the session is in progress and directs them to the in-session zoom chat function should they need to contact one of the moderators. Halfway through the session there is a break and informal chat for 10 minutes, before returning to study. The last 5 minutes are used to summarise how the session has gone and what attendees have achieved in the time.

Feedback, both oral and in response to a feedback survey, has been detailed and overwhelmingly positive. Students reported that they feel more motivated if they commit to attending a Virtual Study Session; they cite feelings of accountability and talk of "being in it together." This initiative enables us to reach distance learners who would not otherwise use the physical library building and encourages feelings of 'belonging' to the Strathclyde community. This initiative has been innovative, people-oriented and collaborative and has fostered a sense of belonging amongst participants.

40 Virtual Study Sessions have taken place between April to August 2021 with 295 bookings in total. On average there were 7 students in a session. The sessions are still running and can be booked here:

<https://bookings.strath.ac.uk/Home/Course/5713>

### Participant Testimonials

Tagged: Belonging and learning communities

#### JUDGES' COMMENTS:

This is an example of a highly innovative response to the specific needs of students during the pandemic. The originality of the Virtual Study Sessions will have required a clear insight into, and understanding of, student needs. This was combined a degree of boldness to propose and implement such an original response. The feedback indicates that the outcome was highly successful in supporting students' needs during the pandemic.

#### Appendix 4 – Standout Questions from the Q&A

1– If you are planning on expanding the service, will you be putting a cap on the number of participants for each session? – we have no plan to cap it at the moment as we don't have unmanageable numbers of participants at the moment, but should it expand further it is something we can look into.

2 - Are faculties fully aware of this service? – we believe so as it gets mentioned at information literacy sessions at the start of term.

3 - Is it promoted via My Place or any other portal? – it is promoted on My Place and we are looking into other places we can promote this service without over doing it.

4 - Thought the filmed testimonials were great! Wondered if welfare or student union could contribute and it be included at start or end maybe? Could a short video clip be added to the start or end of a session telling the students about welfare services? – This is a really interesting idea, and we're happy to look into it. Although we wonder if it might be better served as an addition to the Library Lounge sessions rather than the study sessions. It would always be a useful thing to have in our back pocket should any of the chat questions are looking for external help.