

Virtual Study Session: recreating library vibes in a virtual environment

GENERAL BACKGROUND

Under the definition of "Library", the Cambridge Academic Content Dictionary says "*a building, room, or organization that has a collection of books, documents, music, and sometimes things such as tools or artwork, for people to borrow, usually without payment*". The Collins COBUILD Advanced English Dictionary adds: "*[...] is a building where things such as books, newspapers, videos, and music are kept for people to read, use, or borrow*".

But the libraries represent more than this... The library is a community hub. It's a safe place for those who are looking for peace; it's an inspiring place for those who are looking for ideas; it's a place of motivation for those who are looking for encouragement; it's a welcoming place for those who are looking to exchange ideas, knowledge, stories, lives.

Especially during the pandemic and the consequent lockdown, the importance of a sharing place becomes more evident. And it is with this background that a library team at Strathclyde University decide to develop the idea of the Virtual Study Session. Inspired by The University of Sheffield Virtual Library Commons' "Come together, Write now" sessions, our colleague Lynsey Sampson - senior library assistant - together with other colleagues, began developing the idea of virtual study sessions as an addition to the existing programme of online sessions branded 'library lounge'.

We were aware that most of our students couldn't visit the physical library, either because they are distance learners, they have not been able to travel back to the UK due to the pandemic, or because of the need to isolate themselves. As a result, we needed to find another way for Library staff to support our students. The main aim was to build a community and offer support for recreating the physical library vibes on a virtual platform.

THE BEGINNING OF OUR JOURNEY

The library lounge virtual study session was first launched in April 2021. The initial popularity encouraged us to keep going and we have been running it ever since twice a week, one in the morning and the other one in the afternoon, to help overseas students in different time zones too.



In May 2022 we celebrated the 100th session!

Figure 1 slide displayed in May for the 100th anniversary

But what are exactly the Virtual Study Sessions?

The VSS are online study sessions facilitated by library staff. The sessions are run on Zoom and are 2 hours long. We start with a five-minute welcome and general discussion where attendees and staff are encouraged to share something about what they want to achieve from the session such as coursework, PhD research, studying for exams or work tasks.

At this point, everyone goes on mute, turns off their cameras and gets on with their work while a slide is displayed of the library to provide that feeling of being 'virtually there'. The participants can use the chat panel if they need support or if they have any enquires for the library staff.



Figure 2 Slide displayed during the VSS

Halfway through the session, there is a break and informal chat for ten minutes, before everyone returns to their study. The last five minutes are then saved for everyone to come back together and summarise how the session has gone and what they have achieved.

FEEDBACK – WE ARE GREAT!

The virtual study sessions had already had more than 713 attendees between April 2021 and May 2022 and an impressive 100% satisfaction rate.

We also received verbal feedback 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)”

Or

“Invisible people become visible in the library”

We had an important recognition also from the University when we won an award for the initiative in the university’s *Celebration of innovation and resilience at Strathclyde* competition.

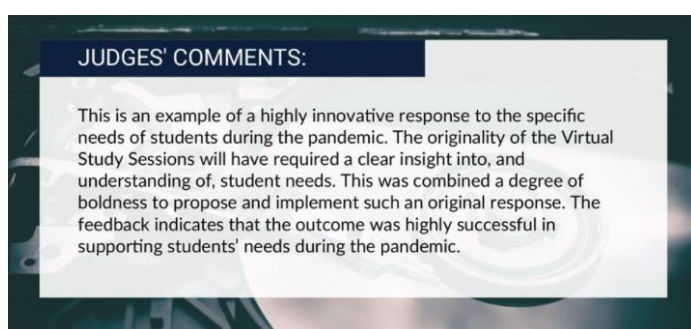


Figure 3 Comment from the Scholarship Award

This helped us to secure additional funding to promote the sessions more widely across the university as well as to other academic libraries at conferences such as Digifest 2022 and CSGUK’s “Inspired Ideas from the Sharp End” on the 30th of June 2022. We are also creating a toolkit to provide an open-access resource for the wider community.

CONCLUSION

In the end, I would say that the VSS experience has been highly valued not only by our students but also by all the staff involved. Being part of the VSS project allowed us to work with people from different departments across the library, and share different working experiences, hence growing personally and professionally.

If you want to learn more about the Virtual Study Session, please visit our website strathprints.strath.ac.uk/80001.