

University of Surrey

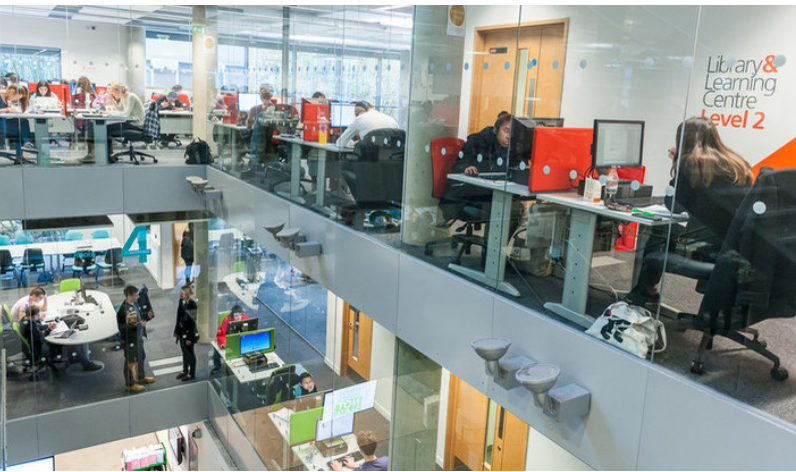
Student Curators Take
Leading Voice in Highlighting
Equity and Inclusion Across the
Campus



At the University of Surrey, an innovative Student Curator program built on the Ex Libris Leganto® course reading list solution has positioned the library as a leading campus voice in the areas of diversity, equity, and inclusion.



“After the curation is over, the output lives on....The lists and resources are used after the fact in all kinds of ways, so the students leave a lasting legacy.” Catherine Stephen, University of Surrey



About the University of Surrey

For over 50 years, the University of Surrey has been imagining what a better world would look like and doing the work to make it happen. With a diverse student body including more than 33% international students and 40% identifying themselves as black or minority, the Department of Library and Learning Services is committed to inclusive approaches to academic and personal development. It pursues a variety of programs and services both formal and informal, many in partnership with the University of Surrey Students' Union.

More Relevance for the Library

'How can we make the library come to life, and how can we make it relevant to students?' Catherine Stephen, Associate Director of Education and Research of the University of Surrey library, has a history of looking outside conventional library roles and asking questions such as these. The answers led to a unique initiative, run by the library in partnership with the Students' Union. Under the [Student Curator](#) program, students bring their creativity, curiosity, research skills, experiences, and unique voices to create themed displays, events, and collections of materials to share with the university community. Students draw from the library collection and have the opportunity to extend it as well.

The origin of the Student Curator initiative was Grow Your Library, an effort at student-driven collection building. 'It was giving away some of our power', explains Stephen, 'which is something the library wanted to do'. But library staff found telltale patterns in the results, as Stephen notes. 'We were seeing a lot of the same requests as well as indications that students weren't engaging with the existing collection'.

Efforts to mark national awareness months left the team uncomfortable. Initiatives were seasonal, running annually at a specific point in the year and trying to make the most of year-end budgets. 'We started thinking, we have October, which is Black History Month, and February is LGBT Month', explains Stephen. 'What about all the other areas that don't have a month or week? How can we explore all year round and make sure we're not just being tokenistic? How can we be certain that we're representing all the different voices? That's when we came up with the idea that we could have students celebrating what the library already has and could give them the opportunity to add to the collection in their own way'.

A Lasting Legacy with Leganto

Since 2020, the library has been using the Ex Libris Leganto course reading list solution for academic classes (after switching from Talis Aspire). The solution enables users to select library and non-library resources, organize them, and make them readily available to others, so it was a natural fit for the Student Curator initiative. The library learned that through the use of Leganto, the student projects were more than a 'one-and-done' activity. 'After the curation is over, the output lives on', declares Stephen. 'We keep the [reading lists](#), along with any multimedia or other items that the curators added to the collection. The lists and resources are used after the fact in all kinds of ways, so the students leave a lasting legacy'.

“In the library, we’ve seen the impact that our efforts have had on students. We’re proud that this project has inspired and enabled conversations in the university community” Catherine Batson,
University of Surrey

Broad Topics, Room for Interpretation

Faculty Engagement Manager Catherine Batson credits Stephen with the creative idea for the program. Batson sees her own role as ensuring that the program is planned, is organized, and stays true to its mission: ‘As we see it, the student is the subject specialist in the topic area, and we are listening. The student is driving the project, the plan, and the choice of materials in any display or social media campaign. We are there to facilitate, suggest, and guide, but the students are the experts’.

And where do the topics come from? Stephen shares, ‘We work quite closely with the Students’ Union to identify suggested themes. We look for very broad umbrella themes that students can interpret for themselves, and we put the curated themes out to the entire university’. To date, the library has sponsored about a dozen curations.

One, in particular, has been a major influencer, well beyond the walls of the library. As Batson relates, ‘Under the theme of “Culture and Tradition”, the student put together a fantastic curation on colourism. She did interviews around people’s experiences with colourism, chose works of literature that reflect the theme, and included research papers so the conversation could be seen in all different lights. She added photographic images and videos to the reading list, which brought the project to life. She taught and educated the entire institution on colourism and was recognized within the university. We saw significant outreach, as well. The project went viral, and she was retweeted by influencers in South Africa’.

The Library as a Leading Voice

The library continues to grow and innovate, finding new uses for Leganto in the process. One example is the [SurreyReads](#) initiative. According to Stephen, ‘the student curators were increasingly choosing fictional works, which is great, but those tend to get lost in an academic library. SurreyReads is about understanding under-represented voices, but through fiction. That is Catherine Batson’s project, and Leganto facilitated it as well’.

The University of Surrey leadership is passionate about inclusivity. Pro-Vice-Chancellor, Academic Professor Osama Khan recognizes that many of the conversations around inclusivity started in the library. Moreover, the library was speaking about decolonizing the curriculum well before the rest of the university was addressing the topic. As Batson relates, ‘In the library, we’ve seen the impact that our efforts have had on students. You could say that the library’s work was the forerunner of the university-wide efforts’.

Impact on Learning

In addition to educating the rest of the university, what are the student curators learning for themselves through the process? ‘The students have been incredibly diligent about the materials they choose’, recounts Batson. ‘They take the process very seriously and understand the differing quality of materials, the importance of who published the materials (and where), and the authors that should be highlighted and valued. Also, I’ve loved sharing our ideas and activities with other libraries, and two of our student curators have joined us at conferences to present papers around their themes and curations’.

The library’s stated goal for the Student Curator initiative is to start conversations, build a living collection with materials that champion inclusivity and diversity, promote a sense of belonging, and celebrate the University of Surrey community. It has gone beyond that, as Batson states. ‘Some of the materials that the student curators have chosen or added to our collection are showing up on course reading lists. The usage of those items goes through the roof, as you would expect, so we can see the influence they’re having’.

For more information about the [Student Curator Program](#) and the [reading lists](#) that have been created, see the [University of Surrey’s Library’s website](#).

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