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Open Doors: library cross-sector co-operation in Bristol, UK

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper outlines the aims, activities and outcomes of a project to pilot a reciprocal borrowing scheme between public and academic libraries using existing cards, i.e. public library cards in the academic library and university ID cards in the public libraries.

Design/methodology/approach – This is a case study providing practical information about the establishment and promotion of the service, and recounting the feedback from surveys of participants, prospective users and library staff.

Findings – The project outcomes indicate that the reciprocal use of existing library cards between institutions and public libraries in a geographical area: was relatively simple once set up; was appreciated by all those who participated; had few teething problems; had had no appreciable impact on the availability of academic stock to University of the West of England (UWE) students; increased public library and academic library usage by target groups, e.g. school students 16 years and over, enabled the public library service to provide a significantly better offer of resources to its community, especially those who needed access to specialised stock, not normally available in a general public library service.

Originality/value – The partnership between LibrariesWest (led by South Gloucestershire Libraries) and UWE Bristol Library Services is not unusual. However, the approach taken, i.e. to allow borrowers to use their own libraries' cards without any data sharing between the respective systems, is fairly unique. The processes involved and the evaluation of the scheme are of value to other prospective partnerships where organisations are geographically aligned.

Keywords Public libraries, Partnership, Co-operation, University libraries

Paper type Case study

Introduction and context

This case study demonstrates how partnerships between different library sectors can deliver improved services. Through outlining a joint membership project, the issues and benefits of partnerships working are articulated. The outcomes of the project indicate clearly how libraries can work together to promote learning and community engagement.

The two main partners in the project were Library Services at the University of the West of England, Bristol (UWE), and South Gloucestershire Libraries.

UWE, Bristol

UWE is a campus-based university whose main site is located in South Gloucestershire. It has two smaller campuses in Bristol plus a small health library in Gloucester. There are around 27,000 students and over 3,000 staff. UWE styles itself as a “real world” university and is focused on practice-led programmes. As such, it is keen to connect and work with the local and regional economy to advance the health, sustainability and prosperity of the region. UWE Library Services is also committed to community and business engagement and contributes to this through provision of

various services, e.g. an external borrowing scheme for over 16-year olds, which is free of charge, and guest (walk-in) access to online resources – for those resources that permit such access – from all its networked PCs. In addition to this, library staff work with schools, e.g. sixth-form visits and with local schools' librarians.

South Gloucestershire libraries

South Gloucestershire has a population of 269,000 and is located to the north of Bristol. The library service has no central library but a network of 13 medium-sized branches and has a catalogue of 250,000 non-specialist stock. Two of the Council's priorities are to improve performance in secondary schools and to support the local economic agenda.

LibrariesWest

South Gloucestershire is part of a consortium of libraries in local authorities around the Bristol area that also includes Bristol, North Somerset, Somerset and Bath and North East Somerset. This means that residents have physical access to over 100 libraries. The joint catalogue provides access to two million items. The consortium offers users an Active Card. This is “more than just a library card”, as it also offers joint membership with leisure centres, promoting the idea of “active in mind and body”, thereby supporting the health agenda. In addition, it has the potential to become a cultural

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access card through further collaboration with the Bristol Old Vic Theatre. The card is sustained through shared data between the systems and a shared approach to marketing.

South Western Regional Library Service

The Open Doors project was made possible through the success of a bid for funding to the South Western Regional Library Service (SWRLS). This organisation includes libraries from a range of sectors across the south west of England, ranging from Gloucestershire in the north to Cornwall, Dorset and Channel Islands in the south and Swindon in the east.

SWRLS objectives are, through co-operation, interlending and joint training, to promote the principle of community education. When SWRLS was established in 1937, the focus was on interlending, but this activity has been dropping over the past few years, and the focus is now much more on joint training and development initiatives and sharing of resources, where possible. The most recent strategic plan has identified the following as the current priorities: to raise the profile of SWRLS; to demonstrate value for money; to provide project funding; and to encourage partnership working, resource-sharing and collaborative collection development. Over the past four years, SWRLS has mediated a grant scheme to encourage collaborative projects between members in support of its objectives.

The UWE guest (walk-in) access to e-resources (Holmes *et al.*, 2012) was a previous recipient of such funding, working with higher and further education (FE) libraries in the region to audit and raise awareness of which academic libraries offered access, to which resources and how. This was partly the result of requests from public libraries who were being asked by independent researchers how to access scholarly journals.

The project offering

Approach and objectives

The overall purpose of the Open Doors project was to investigate, pilot and evaluate joint membership between a public library service and a university library. This involved exploring the joint use of cards without merging membership databases but using the barcode as the common access point. The project evaluated the impact of reciprocal borrowing and identified which considerations needed to be addressed to facilitate such a scheme, e.g. in terms of policy and practice.

The project team bid for £5,000 of funding which paid for a member of staff to work part time, fixed term on the project, and also provided funds for promotion of the initiative.

Objectives of the project are:

- to investigate the ability of the community to access public and academic libraries through the use of their home library card;
- to identify issues connected with open usage of academic libraries, including support and safeguarding issues;
- to cross-promote usage of academic libraries by the public, especially 16-18-year old students and for higher education (HE) students to make use of their local public library network;
- to evaluate the issues of introducing free membership to non-members of academic institutions;

- to support the South Gloucestershire universal membership scheme for young people; and
- to promote usage of HE libraries by students, considering applying for university to encourage progression to UWE.

Project activities

Information collection

A survey of SWRLS libraries elicited the information that all higher education institutions and half of the FE institutions offer some kind of external borrower scheme and that most of the former charge a fee. These schemes generally have low numbers of external borrowers (i.e. less than 50), although one has more than 1,000. They reported a low perceived impact on their service and did little monitoring or evaluation.

The project team visited the Hive at Worcester, which is a joint initiative where the public library, local history centre, local council services and the university library share a building and stock (Hannaford *et al.*, 2012).

A literature review established that reciprocal borrowing schemes between local authority and higher education libraries in the UK, whereby members of the public are able to join and borrow from university libraries free of charge, seem to be relatively uncommon. However, a growing number of university libraries, like UWE, have begun to introduce what has come to be referred to as “walk-in” or guest access, for members of the public, to a limited range of their online resources, depending on licences.

A few university libraries in the UK offer a free external borrower scheme for those who live, work or study in their geographical area, including Salford (www.salford.ac.uk/library/use/community-access, accessed 13 March 2015), Swansea (www.swansea.ac.uk/iss/libraries/visitorsinformation, accessed 13 March 2015) and UWE Bristol (www1.uwe.ac.uk/library/visitingthelibrary/notbasedatuwe/, accessed 13 March 2015).

A number of collaborative access schemes are running in the UK between academic and public libraries, some of which may include borrowing facilities, but most of them seem to allow reference use of university library collections only. These include Inspire North East (<http://lis.tees.ac.uk/inspire/>, accessed 13 March 2015) and Edinburgh (<https://edinburghlibrariesagency.wordpress.com/join-us/>, accessed 13 March 2015).

Public libraries, particularly large central libraries, for the most part, encourage students to use their resources and to study in their libraries as an alternative to using their university resources and facilities.

Joint-use libraries, i.e. libraries which serve two or more communities, e.g. school and public libraries or university and public libraries, have become an interesting phenomenon during the past decade or so (McNicol, 2008 and Gunnels *et al.*, 2012). According to McNicol:

[...] they encourage collaboration and partnership working; they can be a more efficient means of providing services; they have the potential to be more environmentally sustainable; they can be a forum to promote lifelong learning, especially within communities where education has not been traditionally valued.

Joint-use libraries in the UK that offer services to higher education **and** public library users are rare. In addition to the Hive in Worcester, only the Forum in Southend (a partnership between the University of Essex, South Essex College and

Southend-on-Sea public libraries) has been recently established in the UK, along these lines (*CILIP Update*, 2013). There are a number of such initiatives around the world, including Australia, Scandinavia and the USA. According to McNicol (2008), quoting Bundy, (1997) “in 1978 there were just 21 joint-use libraries reported in Australia, but by 2007 the number had risen to 120”, although it is not clear how many of these are joint HE/local authority libraries.

Reciprocal and collaborative borrowing schemes whereby **existing cards** have been validated for use with the loan system of the partner service are rare, particularly where libraries are located in different geographical places. Users of The Hive in Worcester are able to use their public library or university ID card to borrow material, and there is very little restriction on what members of the public library service can borrow from the university’s collections. Users of the Forum in Southend retain their own cards, and while the building is shared between HE, FE and local authority libraries, members of the public library are not entitled to borrow university materials. Users of the Open for All scheme in South Wales are provided with a “passport” which authorises them to join their local HE Library and be given an external borrower card. This model seems to be more common than the facility for validating membership/ID cards of one library for use in another.

Practicalities

The aim was to make the system as simple as possible. South Gloucestershire’s experience of the Active Card project, and merging/sharing data, demonstrated that this can be quite complicated, not least in terms of currency and data protection issues. So, the unique idea for the Open Doors project was that the university and the public library members should be able to use their existing card to borrow from the others’ libraries without prolonged registration and identification procedures. Library members can present their existing university card at the public library or vice versa, and the library staff at that library record brief details of the person on their respective library system. No further ID is required, as it is deemed enough that the person has the requisite credentials to have registered at their original library.

The key (and common) element to the success of the venture is the barcode. As all the libraries involved, both public and university, use radio-frequency identification (RFID) self-issue systems, these units just had to be tweaked slightly to be able to read the barcodes on the partner libraries’ cards. Luckily, the technical protocols were standard which meant that the barcode readers would accept the barcodes on the “alien” cards. However, care will need to be taken, in purchasing new barcodes, that the sequences do not overlap or duplicate those of the partner organisations. As the length of the barcodes used by the different libraries were distinct, it is not anticipated that this should be problematic. Although each RFID unit had to be checked manually (which was no mean feat in LibrariesWest where, even in Bristol alone, there are over 30 libraries), once sorted, this does not need to be revisited. It is still deemed more manageable than having to bulk transfer data from one system to another on a regular basis and to have requested the permission of library users for this to be done.

Promotion

The initiative was promoted initially to groups most likely to benefit the institutions involved. Sixth-form students were already being targeted by South Gloucestershire libraries for membership of the Active Card via the regular visits by the schools librarians. Data transfers from the schools had been negotiated which meant that South Gloucestershire send the sixth formers newsletters containing information about library services and activities that are pertinent to them. As UWE’s community engagement librarian was also linking with local sixth forms, the Open Doors project was promoted jointly, and when sixth formers came to the university on visits, they were encouraged to join the Open Doors scheme. This, of course, fits with UWE’s outreach activities and the desire to encourage school students to consider UWE as their university destination of choice.

It was felt that students coming to university in Bristol do not appear to engage very much with their local public libraries; therefore, that the Open Doors scheme could put them in touch with fiction that might not be so readily available in their university library and with local events that might help them to integrate better into the community. The promotional work took advantage of the UWE media and social networking opportunities, ranging from Internet and intranet communications, e-news, Facebook and Twitter to paper-based posters and bookmarks. A particular focus was placed on promoting the scheme to international students via their specific communication channels, as they might find materials written in their native language in some of the local public libraries.

As UWE offers nursing and allied health courses, the library targeted information about the project at the students, mentors and associated partner colleagues in hospitals and other health care providers. Targeting to local business communities has been slightly more circumspect owing to the need to manage expectations about the amount and range of UWE resources (particularly legal and business focused licensed e-resources) that can be borrowed/accessed through the Open Doors and guest-user access schemes.

Bookmarks were created to promote the initiative to library users at all the libraries involved ([Appendix 1](#)).

South Gloucestershire Libraries has used its email newsletters to target the different user groups, ensuring that the message is appropriate to the age range. In this way, it is hoped that those independent researchers, mentioned at the outset, are being made aware of the scheme and people developing their careers and in need of appropriate resources.

During the project, National Libraries Week in 2014 offered an opportunity to link with local media reporting. Radio Bristol broadcast from different public libraries each day interviewed UWE and South Gloucestershire library staff about the scheme.

During the course of the project, the access to research pilot ([Jubb, 2014](#)) was announced, and all the LibrariesWest organisations have taken up the initiative, which provides access to a range of scholarly journals. It could be argued that this might serve to dampen demand to access the resources of the local university library, but conversely, it might also provide a taste of the kind of resources that access to the university library can only fully satisfy.

Project outcomes

What people did

Nearly 300 LibrariesWest members registered at UWE (across all three Bristol sites) from 1 December 2013 to the end of October 2014. Of these, 120 had not yet borrowed, and 53 of them had generated at least one bill for an overdue item.

Far fewer UWE members registered with LibrariesWest libraries (around 30), but numbers have been more difficult to collect because of the large number of libraries involved. Also, many of the staff and students who live in Bristol are already members of their local public library and, therefore, have no need to use their UWE card to borrow, as they already have an Active Card.

What people said

A survey was conducted from 6 to 31 May 2014 (Appendix 2). A questionnaire was sent to everyone who had joined the scheme and was also targeted at all UWE staff and students, irrespective of whether they had joined to find out whether they had heard of it and, even if not, what they thought of the idea. There were 120 respondents. Of the 90 UWE responses, 19 were from students, two of whom were international students. When asked whether they knew they could use their UWE card in a public library, 42 per cent said that they **did** know. The majority knew about this from the UWE website, either the intranet (44 per cent) or the library website (15 per cent). Of the 32 public library/school users who responded, just over half knew that they could use their public library card at UWE, and 52 per cent had used a LibrariesWest card to access UWE Library.

The following is a selection of quotes from the survey.

From LibrariesWest members regarding UWE:

As well as encountering helpful counter staff, I had a very helpful email from a subject librarian who had been to some trouble to look into what material the university had on the subject of ragged schools [charitable organisations dedicated to the free education of destitute children].

Helpful to someone with Asperger's.

Your staff are lovely, the atmosphere is welcoming. You even have the same RFID like us in public libraries. The books I discovered were useful and your opening hours convenient. Just heard that I've secured a place as a student come September [. . .]. Many thanks for your smiley assistance; it definitely helped me to move my life on.

Statistics aside, this evidence of impact on a person's life plans is impressive!

From a UWE member regarding the scheme:

Although I don't use local libraries, I think this is a great scheme and I have publicised it to my second year students as a good way of accessing primary research materials the UWE library cannot hold, e.g. film star biographies.

This comment, whilst very positive, also serves to raise the issue of the need for some collaborative collection development/management across the library sectors!

What impact it had

The borrowing statistics of the LibrariesWest users from UWE libraries were analysed and indicated that books were issued from a wide range of the (Dewey) subject areas. Some of these clearly related to school student projects and to topics of interest in the media, e.g. the First World War, women's suffrage, Russian revolution and colonisation of the USA. This has served to allay the fears of some UWE library staff who, in focus groups, had expressed concern that the borrowing might be focussed in popular curriculum areas and,

therefore, negatively impact students. Other staff concerns, i.e. about not checking the LibrariesWest members' ID when they present their card, have been acknowledged. However, unless there is a significant loss of stock or an inability of our public library colleagues to be able to follow-up with the relevant borrowers, there is a disinclination to make the registration process more complex and time consuming.

LibrariesWest colleagues have not seen a large impact of the scheme on their services. However, any increase in (good) use of their libraries is likely to play an important role in their future development, given the funding crisis in the public sector. Indeed, this is a clear driver for public library services in their quest to find improved ways to provide access to information for their users. Research for a recent OCLC (2014) report indicates that 42 per cent of college students used their public library website annually in 2010 and that this increased to 67 per cent in 2014. These statistics were presented in the context of recent changes to education that means students are no longer "directed learners" but are "empowered education consumers", where they prefer choice over tradition, convenience over perfection and self-service over pre-defined options. This suggests that there is much more of a role for public libraries in the whole independent learning arena. By getting school students and university students using public libraries, as a matter of course, they are more likely to retain that link, as they progress through their careers and to use them to support their use of massive open online courses (MOOCs), for example.

What the project team learned

We learned that communication with our own library staff is critical at all stages of such a project and also in the ongoing implementation and development of the reciprocal service. This also involves allaying staff concerns (particularly in the university library) about loss of stock and the danger of failing to fully serve all students' needs. Concerns about inappropriate use of resources by minors and, indeed, safeguarding have not yet materialised, partly because we have targeted promotion at over sixteens and the fact that we have categories of material that cannot be borrowed by external users (e.g. DVDs). In LibrariesWest, getting the message to library staff working at many and various libraries was a slow process and difficult for the library staff to retain information about the scheme if they did not immediately encounter any new members as a result.

We learned that offering opportunities to staff at both the public and university libraries to visit each other, and to find out more about their respective ways of working, was extremely valuable. This will now become a regular aspect of our respective ongoing staff development activities.

We learned that getting the technical aspects sorted as soon as possible was really important to the project and to the confidence of the staff mediating the service. Although this was manageable because of the compatibility of the technical standards, it was rather time consuming at the outset. However, the frontloading of effort has saved a lot of time down the line.

Although this project resulted from a simple idea, it involved a range of people, services and different elements, e.g. technical, policy-related, promotional and evaluative. Using the funding for a fixed term project manager to co-

ordinate all this was fundamental to achieving the objectives and creating a sustainable working practice.

Indeed, we learned that part of the success of the project resulted from the fact that the partners had a common aim and that the objectives aligned with those of their respective organisations. Both parties contributed effort and expertise equally and perceived the benefits to be equally shared.

The future

The organisations involved are extremely aware that communication and promotion need to be continued at the same pace. As new students arrive each year, the university has to re-advertise the scheme, but it also has to refresh the promotion to engage existing students and staff. Similarly, with public library users, the message needs to be mediated in fresh ways. In February, the National Libraries Day celebrations are always a good point at which to re-iterate such schemes.

Further monitoring and evaluation of the take-up, and analysis of the impact, needs to be done to find out more about why people are using the service, what they are accessing and how it helps them in their learning, research, careers, hobbies and lives generally.

For South Gloucestershire libraries, which offer various virtual services such as magazine databases and the driving test, it is important to work with university staff to target these at a population which includes people of the age most likely to benefit.

This is a scheme that other university libraries might consider, along with their respective public library services and perhaps involving local FE colleges too.

In light of the universal offers being developed by the Farrington (2014) in public libraries, this kind of scheme, whereby staff and library members across sectors are working more collaboratively, provides the opportunity to reach further afield to promote and encourage uptake of these offers.

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About the author

Jacqueline Ann Chelin has worked in academic libraries since she qualified as a librarian over 25 years ago. She is the Deputy Director of Library Services at the University of the West of England, Bristol. For over a decade, she taught for the Masters in Information and Library Management at the University of Bristol and then at the University of the West of England. She is particularly interested in the development of academic and information literacy skills and has always had a keen interest in the institution's role in community engagement and in issues of equality, diversity and inclusivity. Jacqueline Ann Chelin can be contacted at: jacqueline.chelin@uwe.ac.uk

Appendix 1. Promotional materials

Bookmarks

Figure A1

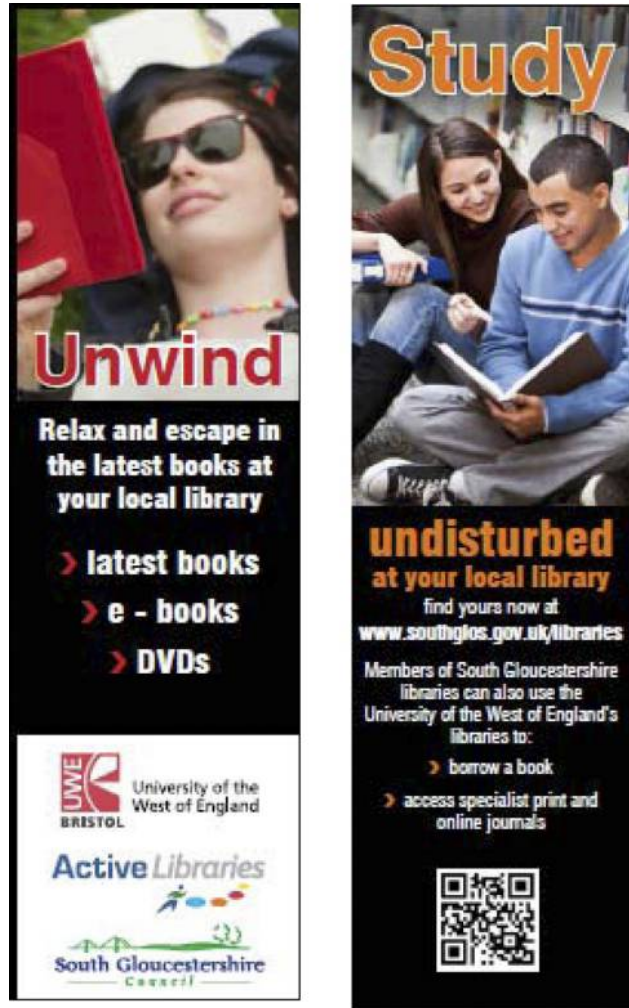


Figure A1 Continued

Using your UWE ID Card in public Libraries

Did you know you can use your UWE ID Card in public libraries near UWE?

The LibrariesWest consortium includes public libraries in Bristol, South Gloucestershire, Bath & NE Somerset, North Somerset and Somerset.

Why not do a bit of leisure reading: novels, cookery, sport, how-to manuals, etc. or pick up a DVD.

You can also find books in many languages via the Bristol public libraries.

To get started take your UWE ID Card to a public library, register and start borrowing.

To find your local LibrariesWest library follow the QR code or go to www.librarieswest.org.uk



UWE
BRISTOL University of the West of England

Funded by South Western Regional Library Service



LibrariesWest

Appendix 2. Main user survey

Figure A2

The screenshot shows a survey form with the following content:

swrls LibrariesWest South Gloucestershire Council UWE BRISTOL University of the West of England

In December 2013 UWE Bristol Library Services and LibrariesWest launched a shared library membership scheme between the University and local public libraries and funded by the South Western Regional Library Service – details [here](#).

This survey can be completed by you even if you haven't taken part in the scheme as it aims to find out how this scheme is working and if people aren't using it we need to know that too.

We would welcome the opportunity to obtain more first hand feedback and you will be asked for your contact details at the end - this is optional.

Thank you for taking time to complete this survey.

Please start by telling us whether you are*

UWE Staff or Student

A member of the public or school student

UWE Student / Staff Survey

UWE Student / Staff survey Please tell us whether you are UWE Student or Staff member*

UWE Student

UWE Staff member

Please tell us the name of your Faculty or Service*

Are you a UWE International Student?*

Yes

No

Do you use the UWE Library*

Yes

No

This is to find out if you are a library user. If you answer 'no' please tell us why not to help us develop our service. Thank you.

If you answered no please tell us why not.*

Please tick the UWE campus library you visit most often*

Frenchay

Glenside

Bower Ashton

St Matthias

Alexandra Warehouse

None - I don't visit a UWE Library

Did you know that you can use the same card at UWE and the public library?*

Yes

No

If yes, please tell us how you heard about the scheme to use one card at UWE and the public library - please tick all that apply*

Haven't heard about the scheme

Poster in UWE

UWE Intranet notice

UWE library website

UWE e-poster on TV screen

Email

Facebook

Twitter

Newspaper article

Radio item

Bookmark from UWE library

Colleague / fellow student told me

Other:

Figure A2 Continued

Do you use a public library in the LibrariesWest area?*

Yes
 No

*Libraries in Bristol, South Gloucestershire, Bath & North East Somerset, North Somerset or Somerset

Please tell us which public library you visit most often*

Avonmouth

Did you use your UWE card to join your local public library?*

Yes
 No
 No - I already had a LibrariesWest / South Glos Active Card

Do you use your UWE card to borrow books / use resources in your local public library?*

Yes
 No
 No - I already had a LibrariesWest / South Glos Active Card

Please tell us how satisfied you were with your experience of using your UWE Card in the public library*

Very satisfied Satisfied Not very satisfied Not at all satisfied

Please tell us about your experience*

Please tell us what made you decide to join your public library*

Borrow books that are not available at UWE e.g. lifestyle books
 Borrow DVDs
 Borrow Fiction
 Borrow e-magazines
 Borrow e-books
 Borrow audiobooks
 Other:

Please tell us why you did not use your UWE card to join your public library*

Have you borrowed any books or other resources from the Public Library in a language other than English?*

Yes
 No

If you answered yes, please tell us which languages*

Please tell us if you have read information on the notice boards or picked up community leaflets in the public library*

	Yes	No
Notice Boards	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Leaflets	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Other	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

If you answered other please give us more information*