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Implications of student and lecturer qualitative views on reading lists: a case study at Loughborough University, UK

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ABSTRACT

This case study explores student and lecturer views of reading lists at Loughborough University. Taking the qualitative data from two surveys undertaken at the institution, it highlights issues about the purpose, importance, visibility, content, currency and length of reading lists, as well as the availability of material on the lists. It discusses the need for greater promotion of the lists to address some of these issues and the value of the qualitative data as part of this process.

INTRODUCTION

Reading lists have long been a fact of academic life for most institutions of higher education in the UK. Historically these lists contained references to books, chapters, journals, articles, and very rarely audio-visual material, hence their name. Since the advent of the Internet these lists have evolved to incorporate electronic versions of these traditional formats (e.g. e-journals, e-books) as well as new formats such as websites, blogs, videos and even tweets. As these lists can now contain a significant amount of non-textual information they are also often referred to as resource lists.

Typically these lists are handed out or made available online to students at the start of their course. They are also usually provided to the institution's library to support their collection development. As such these lists represent an important channel of communication between lecturers, students and librarians.

In order to effectively support reading lists there is a need to understand how they are perceived by both students and lecturers. This understanding will hopefully facilitate customization of workflows, systems and support to provide a better experience for all those involved with the lists.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Stokes and Martin (2008) undertook a study of tutor and student perceptions of reading lists. In their commentary they note a "paucity" of literature relating to reading lists. Whilst this is particularly true with regard to the pedagogic aspects of the lists there are some interesting prior articles on operational issues of reading lists for libraries. Stopforth (1994) details a project at the University of North Wales to improve the collection of (printed) reading lists from academic staff and Chelin et al. (2005) provide a wake-up call for the need to adopt reading strategies to offset the often impossible demands placed on library stock by reading lists. Stokes and Martin conclude their article with the need for further research into reading lists.

The University of Cambridge (Huw Jones 2009) investigated the introduction of a standard system for reading lists. A survey of their students identified reading lists as "the dominant source of information about books, journals and other course materials". The report goes on to state that

“reading lists are a natural point of coordination between pedagogic support bodies, and are also a major conduit for communication between these bodies and the Faculties and Departments.”

Recent publications in the field have tended to focus on the technical aspects of reading list management. Chad (2010) provides an overview of the development of resource list management and perceives a “need to deliver an institutional coherent approach to students that also feeds into library back-end processes to ensure appropriate resources have been purchased or licensed and are accessible”. Bevan (2012) agrees that technology has a role to play in reading lists, but warns that unless teachers and librarians put students at the centre of this process then it is likely to remain “typically frustrating and sometimes very stressful”.

It is also useful to consider the work undertaken by the University of the West of England (UWE) in the development of reading strategies. These provide examples of good practice to the lecturers when compiling reading lists and include a strategy statement explaining to students the purpose of the lists.

For the past three years Loughborough has been fortunate enough to have hosted a free reading list event. This has brought together library staff, systems suppliers and other interested parties, to highlight and discuss issues of general interest. A common theme of the events has been the need for greater academic engagement both in the implementation of a Resource/Reading List Management System (RLMS) and beyond (Rogers 2012; Stubbings 2012; Linda Jones 2013).

CONTEXT

Loughborough University is one of the UKs top 15 ranked (Mayfield University Consultants 2013) academic institutions and a member of the 1994 Group of 11 leading research-intensive universities. It has a 16,000 strong student body and 3,000 staff and researchers all based at a large attractive single-site campus in the East Midlands. Loughborough has an international reputation for research that matters, excellence in teaching, strong links with industry, and unrivalled achievement in sport.

To better manage reading lists there has been a RLMS at Loughborough since 2000 (Brewerton and Knight 2003). This system enables students to easily access their reading lists online and automatically check availability of recommended resources. It also allows appropriate staff to create and maintain lists, and informs the University Library of any changes made to support its collection development. The system was originally written for in-house usage but was subsequently released as open source.

The process of redeveloping the system from the ground up began in 2007 (Knight et al. 2012). Key to this redevelopment was reflecting on feedback received from both academics and students about the system since its inception. This intelligence helped to identify weaknesses in the existing system and features it was not previously possible to develop. However, it was recognised that this information was limited in scope as it tended to dwell on technical issues and there was also a need to gain a better understanding of the reading lists themselves.

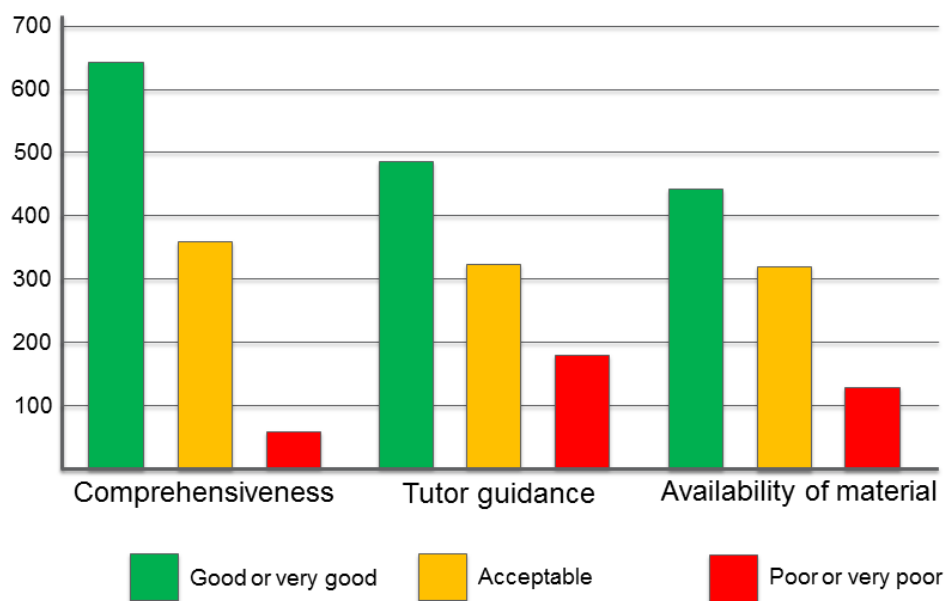
Having seen many reading lists over the years, and been in regular contact with some of their academic compilers, library staff had a good general knowledge of them. For example, it was known that engineering lists tend to be short and consist almost entirely of books, whereas humanities lists

are significantly longer and make greater use of articles. Aside from the make-up of these lists, library staff were interested in the views of others involved in reading lists. Therefore, surveys were conducted to gather intelligence from two key stakeholders: students and lecturers.

METHODOLOGY

In 2011 the University Library undertook an online survey of academic reading by students at Loughborough University (Barnet et al. 2012) which attracted 1,106 responses representing 6.5% of the student population. The survey was made available for two weeks via the University’s virtual learning environment and advertised on student noticeboards and the library website. Around 82% of the respondents were undergraduates, 14% were postgraduates and 4% were other. The number of responses was significantly greater than was usual for library surveys and clearly demonstrated the importance students attached to the subject. Among the 45 questions in the survey were 8 relating directly to the use and level of satisfaction with reading lists.

Student satisfaction with reading lists



The quantitative results from this survey were very encouraging and showed that the majority of students were satisfied with their reading list provision. The survey also attracted a total of 1,533 free text comments, of which 1,017 were in response to “Please tell us how helpful (or not) you find the reading lists”. A review of these free text comments uncovered a wealth of student opinion on all aspects of reading lists that at times indicated a greater level of dissatisfaction than was apparent from the quantitative results.

Later in the same year the University Library carried out a smaller scale online questionnaire survey of academic staff views of student reading and reading lists (Franklin 2012) which elicited 81 responses representing approximately 10.5% of the total teaching and research staff. As with the

student survey, the quantitative results were reassuring with 95% of staff agreeing that reading list were there to extend students' knowledge of lecture topics and 80% agreeing that they helped simulate them to read. Although considerably fewer free text comments were provided (39) these represent an interesting counterpoint to the student comments from the initial survey.

With these two surveys having already been undertaken it was decided not to survey the users again but instead to focus investigations on the qualitative data that had been amassed. A grounded theory approach was used to analyse the student comments which were coded and grouped into related themes. Reviewing these themes seven broad categories emerged, these were: the purpose of a reading list, their importance, visibility, content, currency of the list, length and availability of recommended material. A similar exercise on the staff comments showed that the same basic categories could be utilised with the exceptions of currency of the list and length of reading list for which there was no data.

Each of these categories was examined in turn and common themes were extrapolated for further consideration. Indicative comments from each of the categories were also selected to highlight key concepts.

RESULTS

Student and Lecturer views on the purpose of reading lists

Sample student comments:

- *"The reading lists seem to be very helpful, a lot of the stuff in some of the books help me understand what has been gone over in lectures"*
- *"Most of the reading lists just state which books are on them. If they provided a brief explanation of the contents of the book or why they were on the list, it would be a lot easier to tell if anything on the list would be helpful at the time"*

Sample lecturer comments:

- *"I get the feeling students think a reading list is what they should read, but I prefer to think of it as a guide to further reading and I expect students to also seek their own"*
- *"as a source of reference in their career after completing their studies"*

It is clear from the comments that reading lists support students in their learning. However, it seems that is not always clear to the students exactly what this support is and how best to utilise it. For example, do the lists contain required reading or is it optional? Do they cover the same ground as lectures or go beyond them?

Some of this uncertainty will be answered by the teaching style of the lecturer. But it may also be prudent to follow the example set by UWE of including a statement with the reading list on its intended purpose and how students should approach it. Of course a reading list can serve multiple purposes in which case it may be better to tag individual citations as to their specific purpose or structure the list in such a way as this is apparent (e.g. key resources first, followed by alternatives and finally further reading).

Student and Lecturer views on the importance of reading lists

Sample student comments:

- *“The reading list motivated [me] to read and have increased my knowledge”*
- *“Very helpful, without them I would struggle”*

Sample lecturer comments:

- *“Nowadays students are too much focused on hand-outs and lecture notes”*
- *“One of my modules is orientated towards energy/environmental policy and for this I strongly encourage the use of internet searches for relevant material using keywords”*

There does seem to be a slight discrepancy between student and staff views on the importance and relevance of reading lists. Whilst it is understood that as students' progress in their studies they should require less support, particularly if the aim is to create critical independent thinkers, but this does not necessarily mean no reading list support.

There is no reason why any academic subject should not have a reading list. For rapidly changing subject areas an online reading list (accessed via a RLMS or other mechanism) allows the lecturer to update it throughout the year as required. Alternatively, rather than referring to specific resources a reading list could reference journals, newspapers, websites, subject specific databases or even simply suggest some search terms to enter into a search engine. The latter option would mean that the list would not need to be constantly updated by the lecturer whilst still supporting their students to locate up to date relevant information. Similarly, for projects, thesis and even work placements generic reading lists can be created.

It is important that lecturers and others involved in the content of the institutions' academic curriculum are aware of the importance placed on reading lists by their student body.

Student and Lecturer views on the visibility of reading lists

Sample student comments:

- *“Very helpful, although I think there should be more emphasis placed on them by tutors/lecturers, as they can often be forgotten about or overlooked”*
- *“Don't know about reading lists?”*

Sample lecturer comments:

- *“My impression is that students essentially ignore them, even though I point out relevant chapters in the lecture”*
- *“The reading list itself is not enough to stimulate reading, unless the student is already motivated. To motivate reading I use other approaches usually tied to marking”*

Reading lists need to be easily accessible to students if they are to be of any benefit. The first step in making them accessible is to ensure students are aware of them. Reading lists (or at least their contents) need to be referenced in lectures and seminars. If available online there need to be

prominent links to the list from relevant systems, such as the virtual learning environment and library catalogue, and of course it is important that the lists are mobile friendly for the modern student.

If lecturers are to promote their online reading lists to students then they need to be assured that the students are using them. This may mean making data available to them on accesses to the lists and/or associated library borrowing.

Student and Lecturer views on the content of reading lists

Sample student comments:

- *“The more books that are on it, the easier it can be to overcome any problems you may be having as each book will explain the topic differently”*
- *“lists are too in depth and almost take you away from the limits of the modules”*

Sample lecturer comment:

- *“it would be helpful to hear about any mismatch between lecturers’ and students’ expectations about reading lists. A digest of library loan statistics for my modules would be informative as well so I can see which of the books are actually borrowed”*

Content is key to the success of a reading list. Good content can support students in their learning by providing alternate explanations and perspectives on difficult to explain concepts. It can also present more examples to the learner than can be reasonably given in a single lecture.

In contrast bad content offers no support and can confuse or distract students. If this is the case then it is important that students have adequate means of communicating with list compiler(s). That is not to say that students should dictate the content of a reading list but rather that lecturers should be aware of their perception of a resource and be able to address it if necessary. For example, by stating a given book is a little wordy but contains essential insight into the subject. This both prepares the student to tackle more difficult resources and explains why they should do so.

Student views on the currency of reading lists

Sample student comments:

- *“Due to the rapidly changing nature of the subject, the Lectures reading lists are often out dated”*
- *“I find it helpful when they are updated with the latest books”*
- *“They are okay but need to be updated on a more regular basis to make them more relevant”*

Any reading list will lose its effectiveness if not kept up to date. Whilst it must be acknowledged that some subjects do not change greatly from year to year, that does not necessarily mean the reading need remain static. There may well be newly published or discovered books, articles and websites that are worthy of inclusion.

However, this certainly does not mean that older resources should be excluded from reading lists. It is usual for lecturers to reference seminal works that have helped shape the understanding of a

given subject. Similarly, it may be necessary to understand the historic context and changing popular opinion of a subject by reference to older material. If students are unaware of this, then they could potential reject such resources as being obsolete.

Student views on the length of reading lists

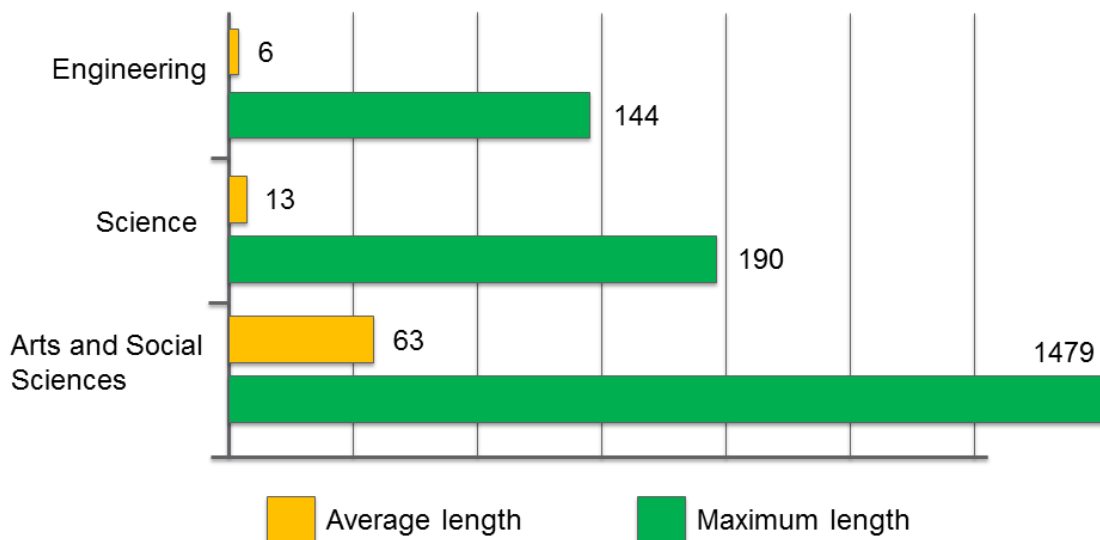
Sample student comments:

- *“Brief & to the point”*
- *“In the end the reading list itself looks too challenging. Often lists can contain over 20 books per lecture!”*
- *“They often are much longer than necessary”*
- *“Helpful, but the list loses value when it becomes very long, with no clear indication of what book is good for which sub-topics”*

The greatest number of student comments received was relating to the length of reading lists. It is very clear from these that students can find long reading lists very daunting.

In the absence of any comments from staff about the length of their reading list the university’s RLMS was examined for data on the average and maximum length of the lists. Unsurprisingly, engineering lists were found to be on average only 6 items with the longest 144 items. Lists in the Arts and Social Sciences were ten times longer with an average size of 63 items and the longest an incredible 1,479 items.

Length of reading lists



For longer reading lists issues such as the structure of the list and guidance provided become more significant. It is not uncommon for these longer lists to be broken down by topic or lecture and in effect become a series of short reading lists.

It should be noted however that longer reading lists do not necessarily imply more reading. A shorter list may reference 6 books, whilst a longer one cites 3 (entire) books, 18 chapters from various books, 27 articles and 13 blog posts. Both these reading lists could easily require the same amount of investment from their students.

Student and Lecturer views on the availability of material on reading lists

Sample student comments:

- *“Helpful, but often list too many books that either are too expensive to buy or get taken out by others students from the library”*
- *“I would like to see all of the books on the reading list available as an e-book”*

Sample lecturer comment:

- *“The library could help me a lot if it chose to by helping me check the validity of the range of reading I give on the lists, monitoring the publications market and, given my interest area, liaise with publishers over approval copies. Not your job? Probably not but it would help me deliver a better quality academic product”*

Hopefully lecturers do consider the availability of a resource before they add it to their reading lists. Whenever new material is added this needs to be communicated to the institution’s library so they can attempt to acquire copies for loan or reference use by the students.

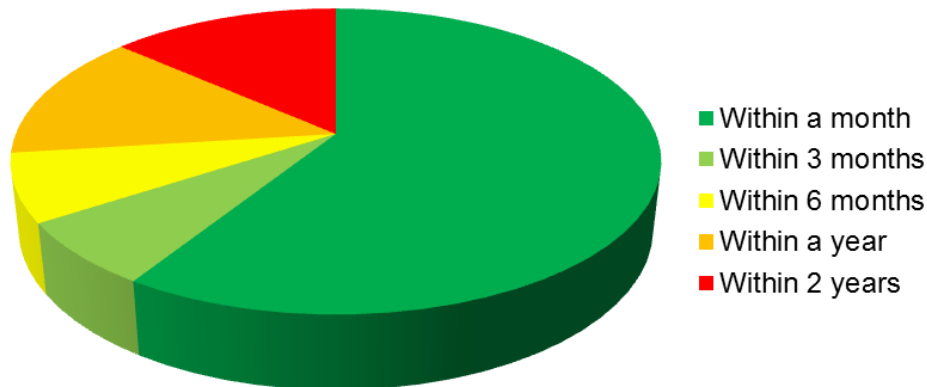
With the increasingly popularity of e-books and other digital resources with students there is also a need to consider what formats a given resource is available in. For example it may be that a given course text book on a list is not available in e-book format so the lecturer might consider adding an alternative book which is available in this format, even if in their opinion the second book isn’t as good.

DISCUSSION

The comments provided raised a number of concerns, but also provide useful indicators on how reading list provision can be improved. Chief among the concerns was the apparent (according to the student comments) lack of up to date lists. As there were no comments from the lecturers to dispute this, the RLMS was interrogated to determine how recently the lists had been updated. The data showed that 86.5% of the lists had been updated within a year and 59% had been updated within the last month. Thus, the students’ perceptions that the reading lists were not being updated were not supported by data from the RLMS. However, this does point to the need for the currency of the lists to be indicated to the students.

Currency of reading lists

When were reading lists last updated



Data collected December 2012

Another concern was that a few students seemed to be unaware of the existence of reading lists. In the past much advocacy work was undertaken to raise the profile of reading lists with both students and lecturers. More recently such activities have taken second place to other local initiatives. Clearly there is a need to step up our promotion of reading lists, at least to the students.

It is also apparent from some of the lecturer comments that not all of them are convinced of the value of reading lists, or perhaps believe that the workload in maintaining them is disproportionate to the benefits they bring the students. This is being partly addressed by providing an “academic dashboard” (Cooper et al. 2012) via our RLMS that shows lecturers how frequently their online reading lists are viewed and also whether material on the lists is being borrowed from the library. In addition, the initial survey provided a wealth of student opinion to demonstrate the importance of reading lists to lecturers. This will be used during training or advocacy sessions for the RLMS and where appropriate quoted in support material.

Consideration may also need to be given to establishing a set of best practice guidelines for the creation of reading lists. It is apparent that there is no one correct style of reading list that is suitable for all as lists can vary dramatically, particularly in size and between academic disciplines. However, that is not to say that there are not obviously areas of commonality, such as establishing a clear purpose for the list, ensuring appropriate guidance for students when using it and keeping it up to date. One option being considered with regards to this is bringing together a number of interested parties to create a set of exemplar reading lists and guidance on their creation.

Finally from a library perspective there is a need to ensure that the collections best support the current and future teaching of the institution. This means aligning the library purchasing policies, and if

necessary stock weeding, more than ever with the content reading lists. In order to do this libraries need easy access to the full range of their institution's reading lists. Loughborough is currently piloting a purchasing predictor to automatically generate suggestions for purchase from the RLMS (Knight et al. 2013).

CONCLUSIONS

Reading lists can and do play an important role in the learning process. However, it is clear that students place greater emphasis on the reading lists than many lecturers do. At a time of increasing student expectations there is a need for institutions to consider whether their reading lists are fit for purpose.

Analysing the qualitative data from the two surveys has provided valuable insight into the often divergent views students and lecturers have of reading lists which would not have been evident by focusing on the quantitative data. It has identified a number of areas for further consideration both in the technical development of the RLMS, but also more importantly in the pedagogic development of the reading lists themselves. This points strongly towards the need for a formal reading strategy to be developed and adopted by the institution. Such a strategy would need input from lecturers, students, as well as the Library.

At the outset of this study the research group were confident in their general knowledge of the creation and use of reading lists. The survey results indicate that there remains much to learn about this underappreciated aspect of the learning and teaching process. For example, does the length of a reading list dictate the amount of reading undertaken by the students? It is hoped that further research can be undertaken to explore in greater depth some of these findings.

It is worth remembering that this study has focused on just one institution and it would be interesting to see whether students and lecturers at other institutions hold similar or dissenting views.

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