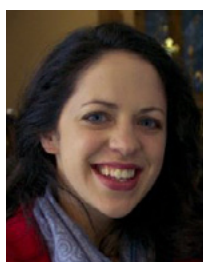# Academic staff perceptions and use of reading lists for book ordering

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The academic library has been in a perpetual state of flux since the emergence of technologies that have changed the shape and scope of how we operate, what we offer in terms of services and resources, and how we communicate with our customers, both students and faculty alike. These factors have been significant catalysts in many of the changes that have taken place in Library and Learning Services (LLS) at the University of Northampton over the last decade. Keeping abreast of up-to-date technology that can enhance both the student *and* staff experience has been fundamental in the implementation of certain software packages. Talis Aspire, in particular, has been a relatively recent LLS acquisition that was obtained to help streamline and standardise the creation and maintenance of reading lists and to assist in the ordering of current and the most relevant resources for each academic course (Talis, 2015).

Indeed, the driving force behind a cross-team research project undertaken by members of LLS staff in 2014 was the ordering process itself and how it could be improved for our customer base, from resource request to availability. After a successful bid, the project secured internal funding from the LLS research fund. The team comprised an academic librarian, a meta-data specialist, the acquisitions manager and two information assistants – one resource management based and one customer service based. The rationale for involving staff who spanned different teams was to ensure that every aspect of the acquisitions process was interrogated to see where potential enhancements to the service could be made.

This research follows on from an earlier research project that looked at how students used reading lists (Siddall and Rose, 2014); tutors had been interviewed, and lamented students' lack of use of journals, and yet few had listed them on their reading lists. This led to the question of how academics chose what to put on their reading lists. While the student experience was the main consideration of this project, the means to reach this end was of the greatest concern. Fundamentally, what gave this project its original scope was its focus on the academics' experience and their knowledge of the processes involved. The research team wanted to understand what kind of barriers they faced when ordering new resources. The questions under consideration were, how do academics select new resources for their courses, and, more importantly, how do they use their reading lists in general and Talis Aspire in particular as resource procurement tools?

Money awarded by the LLS research fund allowed the team to devise and set up a survey using Bristol Online Surveys. This was sent out via email to faculty members by the academic librarian responsible for each faculty and ran for the duration of one month.

The survey

The survey comprised fourteen questions, of which five had sub-questions that sought to qualify the answer and/or expand on the initial question. Most of the questions were multiple-choice, though some called for a more qualified answer or extended comment.

The projected response rate was 50 respondents; in the event 46 faculty members participated. This represented only 8% of the 586 academic tutors who lecture at the University of Northampton; however, those who did engage with the survey for the most part were spread fairly evenly across the academic faculties – business (5 respondents), arts (7), social sciences (9), and education (3). The faculty of health attracted the most 21 academics respondents, while science and technology went unrepresented. The majority (60.9%) had worked at the university for six years or more, while 34.8% had been employed between one and five years. Only two out of the 46 were newly employed by the University of Northampton.

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The survey was in four sections and was designed to target the particular research aims of the project. Section one focused on individual details, i.e. academic subject area and length of employment, how respondents keep up to date with research in their field and their personal view on the purpose of the reading list. Section two broadened into reading lists, asking how respondents decide what to include on the reading list. It also asked whether any supplementary material, i.e. reading that does not appear on the reading list, is recommended to students, and how this is brought to students' attention. We also asked how often the reading list is updated, whether the relevant academic librarian is notified of any changes, whether there is colleague collaboration on individual reading lists and what resources are included. Section three dealt with the ordering process and was devised to discover whether individual faculty members were involved in ordering their own resources, how they went about it and what type of resources they were (print, e-book, multi-media, journal subscription, digitised chapters and articles and other). The final section asked the respondents if they would be interested in taking part in further research into LLS ordering processes (focus groups), and requested additional comments regarding the academics' experience of ordering and accessing resources through LLS.

The results

When analysing the responses it was noted that there was a congruity between how individual faculty members keep up to date with the research in their particular fields, and the materials they include on their reading lists. Overwhelmingly, inspection copies of monographs and textbooks, and literature searches (with 35 and 34 responses respectively), are the primary sources of their information about new areas of research. This was closely followed by publications through professional bodies with which the faculty members are affiliated (32 respondents). Thus, professional networks are a significant source of alerts to new resources, as indeed are departmental colleagues (as 29 of the respondents illustrated). Perhaps surprisingly, alerts such as Zetoc and mailing lists were considered less influential, although publisher lists and catalogues were marginally more useful, with 13 and 23 respondents respectively saying that they utilise these media in their selection of resources.

Noticeably, when analysing the academics' approach to reading lists (i.e. what are they and what do they do), there is a significant variance between individuals' perception of both the function and the utility of the reading list itself. The most common descriptor that emerged in thirteen of the comments was that the reading list was seen as a 'guide'. Other words that were occurred frequently in individual comments on the reading list's purpose were 'provide', 'direct' and 'inform'. The comments were apportioned between those who saw the reading list as indicative of required reading incorporating key texts, and those who saw the reading list as a 'signpost', which had the dual purpose of setting out the required reading as well as suggested or recommended reading around the particular study topic. Thus, establishing a-one-size-fits-all definition or purpose of the reading list from the comments proved problematic. All agreed, though, that the reading list should be up to date, relevant and at the right academic level for the students' particular needs.

Defining the reading list from the survey commentary was challenging. In addition, the response to question 6 – 'Do you recommend additional reading that is not on your reading lists?' – was of particular interest. Overwhelmingly, 36 (78.3%) of the respondents stated they did indeed provide extra material and resources beyond their reading lists, whether through PowerPoint (19 respondents), the virtual learning environment (13 respondents), orally in seminars or tutorials (8 respondents) and/or through module documentation (3 respondents). The justification for this was manifold, and included materials being published after the reading list, supplementary seminar handouts

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beyond the reading list material, resources that dealt with news or current events that were integral materials for seminar debates and particular sources being cited to encourage students to undertake their own literature searches. Only one respondent was adamant that reading lists should be restricted o required reading only and maintained that additional material should only ever be given to those students who wished to pursue the historiography of a particular topic.

It was encouraging to observe that the majority of respondents (31) stated that they update their reading lists at least once a year, with 16 updating their lists when they identified new and/or relevant material. Perhaps less encouragingly for the research project, only 27 respondents notify their academic librarian of changes to their reading lists, either via email or by sending updated lists, or, indeed, by using the review function in Talis Aspire (Talis 2015). The remaining 19 (41.3%) stated that they did not inform their academic librarian of any changes. Such a high proportion of non-notifications would suggest that using the reading list as a resource procurement tool to improve and streamline the ordering process is not without its difficulties. In terms of the resources ordered and included on the reading list, all 46 respondents included books (44 said textbooks and 36 e-books), while 42 included journals and 32 included links to websites. The majority (37) stated that they themselves ordered new resources for the library and of them, 31 emailed their academic librarian with the items they wished to acquire. Only 7 respondents said they used Talis Aspire to order new materials.

Finally, 43 respondents provided further comments on their experience of ordering and/or accessing resources through LLS. The general consensus was that LLS offers a good service. However, a number of comments revealed both a lack of knowledge regarding the role of LLS in the ordering process and insufficient communication between LLS and the faculty in relation to the new materials ordered – e.g. when new orders become available, delays in obtaining individual orders, or the different formats in which particular resources are available for purchase. Newer faculty members expressed complete ignorance as to the ordering process or even how to go about ordering, and suggested that this should be made part of the induction process.

With regard to Talis Aspire and reading lists, the additional comments were mixed. There were positive assertions that the system works quite well, although as with the ordering process, induction sessions and drop-in training would be of benefit to faculty members who cannot make the set training sessions offered. These sessions, run by academic librarians, were viewed as 'very helpful' in supporting the construction of fully supportive reading lists for students on a first-year undergraduate module. Conversely, a number of issues with the system were highlighted, such as the lack of automatic updates for new editions of texts, duplication of administration time when faculty members are required to produce reading lists in other formats (in module guides for validations or on the virtual learning environment). One respondent noted how a reading list that was sent to the librarian for review set off a chain of events that entailed half the department's budget being spent on this reading list alone. The administration time factor in setting up and maintaining Talis Aspire reading lists was emphasised, the suggestion being that library staff should be responsible for creating and updating all module reading lists on the system.

Outcomes

The aim of this research project was to see how the LLS ordering processes could be enhanced by eliciting the academics' perspective and interrogating their practices. The survey conducted by the research team highlighted a number of issues for consideration. Firstly, as the pre-survey literature review demonstrated, and in accordance with similar research projects,

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communication between faculty and library staff needs to be improved. Christiansen, Strombler and Thraxton (2004) have identified what they term an 'asymmetrical disconnection' (p. 18), a culture whereby while the librarians are fully aware of the academics' roles and responsibilities, while the academics tend to have little or no knowledge of the librarians' roles and responsibilities. Indeed, as the survey established, while longer-serving academics had some knowledge of LLS ordering processes, new academics were completely in the dark, even in relation to their own role in the process. Thus, the survey helped the research team to formulate specific questions tailored around reading lists, Talis Aspire and the ordering process, a workflow poster explaining the process from beginning to end, along with a number of suggestions to improve communication and alerts for academics; these were presented to a succession of focus groups that developed from the initial survey.

Secondly, further examination of engagement levels with Talis Aspire and reading lists as effective media for ordering new and relevant resources is needed. The reading list appeared to mean different things to different people. The number and types of resources for each individual module and subject area are diverse and variant, as is the approach to updating the lists and informing the librarians responsible. The question now is, it possible to have a uniform reading list model which would be more suited to LLS ordering processes? Academics are constrained by time, workload and insufficient training, which makes full engagement with Talis Aspire difficult or even impossible; setting up initial lists and maintaining existing lists is something that needs addressing on a university-wide basis. It is clear that this project, undertaken by the LLS research team, has opened up the potential for discussion about how to revise and enhance practices both in the University of Northampton and in the wider community of academic libraries.

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