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Making resources work harder

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DG: Deborah Goodall (Academic Librarian, Human & Health Sciences)
DP: Dave Pattern (Library Systems Manager)
GS: Graham Stone (E-Resources Manager)

1. Prompts for this research?

DG: The University of Huddersfield Library's work on low / non use contributes towards maximising the use of library resources, informing the Library's Customer Service Excellence remit, and University-wide goals such as supporting the quality of the student learning experience, improving retention, completion, progression and achievement, specifically, for two-thirds of students to achieve first and upper second class degrees by 2012/13.

GS: Over the last 10 years we have seen a huge rise in the use of e-resources within the library, usage statistics show an increase year on year, however, 'problems with access' rank alongside 'lack of books' as the perennial favourites in the student feedback survey. We also have to make our resources work harder than ever in the current financial climate. Anecdotally, we're aware that even though overall usage is still increasing, there are a significant number of users who have never opted in to e-resource use. All of our surveys to date have concentrated on users: we have never examined who our non-users are, and their views, until now. These issues have made the low/non use of (e) resources of particular interest to me for a number of years.

DP: We've had a project running for a few years now investigating any areas of non and low-usage of library services and resources by students – specifically e-resource logins, item loans and visits to the library – which has been extremely useful for identifying cohorts of students who underuse our resources. Towards the end of last year, we began wondering if that usage was in any way related to the final grades achieved by our students.

2. Describe the research.

DP: As we had already collated the usage data, we just needed to liaise with colleagues in the Student Records department to extract details of final grades. After an initial check of the data, which indicated that there were correlations, we began looking more deeply for further correlations at a more granular level, down to the level of individual courses of study. Specifically, we examined the final 3 years' worth of usage by the 2007/8 and 2008/9 graduates, and we'll be examining the 2009/10 data shortly.

3. What were the main results?

DP: When we looked at library usage by all graduates, broken down by grade, we saw a striking correlation between the final grade and both book loans and e-resource usage. Although there was no overall correlation with the number of visits to the library, we did see correlations for certain courses.

DP: The following graph shows the average usage by the last 2 years of graduates. On average, those who gained a first-class honours degree borrowed twice as many items and logged into MetaLib (to access e-resources) over three times as much as those who achieved a third-class degree. Also, those who gained a first seem to have a slightly higher ratio of e-resource usage to item loans than the other grades.

graph can be downloaded from

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/davepattern/4749209561/sizes/o/>

4. How are you going to use the results now?

DG: There are quantifiable differences in the resources used by high and low achievers. Our interest now is in unpacking some of these differences between various types of student and identifying interventions that can benefit all students? Do high achievers choose 'better' resources, or are they 'better' at choosing resources. Is non-use a resourcing issue or an academic/information skills issue? Initial dissemination of the results to academic staff has raised all sorts of issues regarding student engagement with formal library provision. Interestingly, in terms of library use, the uniting factor for all students, regardless of attainment, was visits to the library. We will be using focus groups to discover why students visit the library and exactly what, they are doing whilst they are in the Library.

DG: For those students that are borrowing books, we are interested in what are they reading and how they discover what they want to read. We will explore the different ways in which students studying different courses make use of books for study. At institutional level, we know that the library only receives a small proportion of reading lists. Given that, each year, approximately one third of library stock circulates whilst two-thirds stays on the shelf we need to examine how well library stock maps onto prescribed undergraduate academic requirements. At course level, academics provide reading lists, the Library provides a catalogue, but there are anecdotal reasons to suggest that these are not always the main sources of direction for students. We overhear the strength of personal recommendations and we see the use of Google and Amazon to identify useful titles. By supporting our academic colleagues in producing course packs and our students in using other local higher education and NHS libraries are we bypassing University Library provision? An analysis of the most heavily borrowed books by course may quantify the impression that outside influences abound.

DG: Getting to know those students who do not appear to engage with the library will be interesting. We need to find out about the skills and experiences that students bring with them to University. We can learn from other sectors too. For example, what about browsing? This is a common method for borrowers to choose books in public libraries yet we do not cater for this approach in academic libraries. The emphasis on the reading list and the formal presentation of stock could be alienating potential users, and could explain why students are reluctant to deviate from recommended reading. I personally believe if students had more confidence in

their book selection abilities we would see better use of our library stock and an increase in student satisfaction.

5. Do the results have implications for future purchasing?

DG: Lecturers, librarians and suppliers all have a vested interest in use of library resources by students. The lines of communication between the four groups are complex, and not necessarily balanced or strong. They do however have a shared interest in the reading list, and the proposed work will be useful for colleagues within and without the University. A preference towards print or electronic provision appears to be evident for some courses. Understanding exactly how content is sourced by students and how students select relevant items, whether from a list of results in a database or from a shelf of books in the library, may inform future decisions about provision, presentation and promotion of resources.

GS: From an e-resources point of view, it is interesting to see how this information affects our perceptions of high use. For example, a number of business resources are seen as successful subscriptions in that cost per usage is very low and overall usage when measured against other resources is high. However, when bringing this into context with the comparative low/non use of resources within all Business courses, usage could and indeed should be significantly higher. Further analysis of usage versus impact is needed and this may mean we have to re-evaluate our criteria for renewal/cancellation of resources in the future.

6. Do the results have implications for information vendors?

GS: Clearly, being able to link the use of specific resources to this research would be of particular interest to publishers and information vendors. Although we can, to some extent, track the usage from a given course to the login at a resource front page, linking the data at Huddersfield to actual full text downloads at an article level within a specific resource will be challenging.

GS: Vendors may also want to investigate the 'usability' of their resources in the light of this research. Are users put off by the complexity of some interfaces? Anecdotal evidence from a focus group suggested that some students are pushed towards Google Scholar by their tutors. While the library has a clear role to play in the advocacy of its own subscriptions to encourage higher use, vendors also have a lot to lose.

7. How are you taking this work forward?

GS: We need to investigate whether the Huddersfield data is the norm rather than an anomaly. To this extent we are keen to benchmark our data with partners in

other universities. The next step would then be to produce a toolkit to enable other universities to exploit their data.

GS: As a side project we also intend to work with a publisher to see if actual title/article usage can be linked to the data and if so, what implications this has.

GS: Regarding possible renewals/cancellations of e-resources in the light of this data, we will be careful not to make any rash decisions before benchmarking with other institutions and significance testing the data. As the first UK commercial adopter of Summon, the web scale discovery system from Serials Solutions, we will be analysing the data closely to see if the 'ease of use' reported in the focus groups translates to increased use of library e-resources from low/non users.

DP: Through the work we've carried out on our OPAC since 2005, we've been able to show the benefits of adding serendipity – we've seen a marked increase in both the range of book stock being borrowed and the average number of loans per student. With that in mind, I'm interested in seeing what the students who gain a first are doing differently to their colleagues who use the library less and get lower grades. For example, are they borrowing beyond their reading list and are they using a wider variety of e-resources? If so, can we incorporate that information back into the recommendations that we deliver via services such as the OPAC and Summon?

DG: We're consulting with academics to select case studies for next term and to identify issues relevant to each School. We may be dipping in to large cohorts where there are sizeable groups of persistent non-users and perhaps issues with retention, as well as smaller courses where tutors have specific concerns, say, addressing an over-reliance on Google and Wikipedia, or where students show a clear preference for either print or electronic resources. As many of Huddersfield's courses incorporate practice and industry placements this work could give important messages to students, sponsors and employers, about the nature of studying for a degree in today's complex higher education environment. We are aware of course that library use is just one factor contributing towards final grade, but this work presents a great opportunity to try and improve the grade of all students.

GS: It may also be interesting to use eyetracking software as used at Tritonia in Finland (<http://tinyurl.com/tritonia>) to see if users with different attainments view interfaces in a different way.

For more detail:

Goodall, Deborah and Pattern, David (2011) *Academic library non/low use and undergraduate student achievement: a preliminary report of research in progress*. Library Management, 32 (3) (In Press) available at <http://eprints.hud.ac.uk/7940/>

White, Sue and Stone, Graham (2010) *Maximising use of library resources at the University of Huddersfield*. Serials, 23 (2). 83-90 (In Press) available at <http://eprints.hud.ac.uk/7811/>. DOI: 10.1629/2383.