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Original Citation

McGuinn, Kate, Stone, Graham, Sharman, Alison and Davison, Emily (2017) Student reading lists: evaluating the student experience at the University of Huddersfield. The Electronic Library, 35 (2). pp. 322-332. ISSN 0264-0473

This version is available at http://eprints.hud.ac.uk/id/eprint/28649/

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Abstract

Purpose: To evaluate the bespoke Resource List Management System (MyReading) at the University of Huddersfield.

Design/methodology/approach: An online survey was designed to assess student use of MyReading and their views on potential improvements. The survey used closed questions designed to obtain quantitative data. Thematic analysis was used to analyse qualitative data obtained from open questions to obtain.

Findings: The paper supports findings of another recent study which found that reading lists are perceived as more important by students than by lecturers. A variety of positive and negative themes emerged which pointed to this conclusion. Positive themes were: the perceived helpfulness of reading lists; students' view of MyReading as a starting point for independent further reading; ease of use of MyReading and the time saving afforded to students; the value students place on their reading lists as being "quality assured" by lecturers. Negative themes were: inconsistency in the length and structure of lists; concerns that some lists are not regularly updated; lack of awareness of functionality revealing training needs for students and lecturers; suggestions for future enhancements to MyReading. Another finding from the quantitative data is a clear link between low use of reading lists by students in certain Schools and low use of other library resources.

Practical implication: The research provides guidance to universities regarding future development of Resource List Management Systems and promotional and training needs.

Originality/value: The study adds rich information to the existing body of qualitative research on students' perceptions of their reading lists.

Introduction

Founded in 1825 in West Yorkshire (UK) as the Huddersfield Scientific and Mechanic Institute, the modern day University of Huddersfield was formed in 1992 and is now home to over 22,000 students. The University has steadily grown over the years, both in terms of student numbers and in terms of status. Recent years have brought several accolades, including the Times Higher Education University of the Year award in November 2013.

In the UK reading lists or resource lists are provided to students to guide them to appropriate reading material. These lists contain traditional references such as books, chapters, journals, articles. However, online Resource List Management Systems (RLMS) also contain new formats such as websites, blogs and videos (Brewerton, 2014a). The University of Huddersfield Library designed and launched MyReading, its online RLMS, in 2011. By early 2015, the system appeared from the usage information available to have been well adopted by students. However, very little qualitative data existed, apart from data gathered from student focus groups conducted in 2013 and 2014. This data was limited in that the focus group participants were drawn from a small pool of library student helpers.

The MyReading project technical group felt that there was a pressing need to understand more about how students across the university perceive MyReading. There was also a need to evaluate

whether MyReading had met the main objective of the project, which was to improve the student experience of using reading lists. The MyReading project plan included the requirement to evaluate the success of the project in year four. Therefore, the decision was taken to launch a student survey to gather richer information about students' views and experiences. The group wanted in particular to find out what barriers existed to students using their reading lists to the full and what students thought could be done to improve MyReading in the future. In addition, demographic information on students' use of MyReading was collected with the aim of discovering which year groups and schools use it heavily and which make less use, to inform future promotional activity. The project group also took the opportunity to gather data on the effectiveness of a recent marketing campaign. This data has not been included in this paper as it was not felt to be relevant to its aims. A full list of survey questions is given at Appendix 1.

Literature review

Much of the literature on reading/resource list management produced in recent years focuses on the technical aspects of RLMSs. Secker (2005), for example, described the work done prior to the adoption of an RLMS in terms of evaluating three competing products and conducting user needs analysis using focus groups and interviews. Morgan (2007) reported the experiences of the University of Glamorgan library in implementing TalisList. In the same vein, Bartlett (2010) and Cross (2014) discussed the critical factors in successfully implementing Talis Aspire. Cooper, Knight and Brewerton (2013) described a project at Loughborough University to provide information on reading list usage to lecturers via a dashboard interface.

Two studies take a broad overview of reading in higher education generally. Garfield (2007) undertook a literature review on reading, literacy and libraries with a view to developing a reading strategy at Anglia Ruskin University. Barnett et al. (2012) carried out survey based research at Loughborough University, with a view to better understanding decision making. One of the main findings of this study was that reading lists were the primary means students used to locate reading material but that they felt a more consistent approach to providing lists was needed.

Stokes and Martin (2008) focused more heavily on the "perceptions, expectations and realities" of both lecturers and students relating to reading lists, basing their findings on the results of staff and student surveys and unstructured interviews with staff. The data were analysed using an inductive sense-making approach. The research uncovered opposing views on the part of lecturers and students. One theme which emerged was concern on the part of lecturers that some students may fail to become autonomous learners by becoming overly dependent on their reading lists rather than developing the skills to read around their subject. Unfortunately, student responses to the survey appear to reinforce this view, as students tended to see their reading lists as "a means to an end", the end being to complete specific assignments, rather than a starting point from which to begin their learning journey. Another finding of the student survey was that, particularly at lower levels of study, students tended not to use their reading lists very widely, with 18% of respondents saying that they didn't use their reading lists at all.

Piscioneri and Hlavac (2012) reported on their experience of trialling a "Minimalist reading model" to arts and education students at the University of Monash. Under this model, some pre-lecture reading was given to the students in a condensed form using extracts annotated by lecturers which were also hyperlinked to glossaries and dictionaries. The basic principle of this model, according to

the authors, is one of "quality over quantity" (p. 434). The authors investigated student reactions to the model and found that while most welcomed the shorter readings and the additional support provided by the annotations and glossaries, some criticised it as a form of "dumbing down" which could lead to laziness on the part of students.

Siddall and Rose (2014) likewise set out to cast light on the expectations of students and lecturers, focusing on foundation degree lecturers and students. A primary aim of their research was to discover to what extent annotated reading lists were useful as a pedagogical tool to develop students' information skills. The authors discussed the issue of potential "spoon-feeding" of students, a theme which also emerged for Stokes and Martin (2008) who argued that annotated reading lists could conversely be regarded as "scaffolding", providing a temporary structure for students which can be gradually withdrawn, promoting more autonomous learning. The authors used a "concurrent triangulation design" (p.57) of qualitative interviews, focus groups and quantitative analysis of reading lists. Part of the study centred on divergent lecturer and student understanding of labels such as "core" and "essential" to describe reading list items. Both lecturers and students saw reading lists as a starting point for further research. Some lecturers expressed the view that they felt they were treading a fine line between "scaffolding" and "spoon-feeding" and were "wary of giving too much" (p.65). Well-structured and annotated reading lists with plenty of explanation and signposting were found to be invaluable aids to learning for foundation degree students and to build their confidence to become independent learners. The authors concluded that more use could be made of reading lists as a tool to enhance students' information literacy.

Brewerton (2014a) was also keen to investigate the views of lecturers and students on reading lists, focusing on qualitative data. The primary aim of this research was to better understand the issues surrounding reading lists in order to improve support for staff and students, to optimise workflows, and improve the experience of using reading lists for all stakeholders. The data was taken from two surveys undertaken at Loughborough University and the author used a grounded theory approach to identify issues and concerns about reading lists from both sets of users. One of the main themes which emerged from these comments was confusion on the part of students as to the purpose of their reading lists and the expectations lecturers have of them regarding reading all items listed or just some of them. Other themes were the importance, visibility, content, currency and length of reading lists and the availability of items on them. It was clear from the results that students tend to consider their reading lists to be more important than many lecturers do. Two of the conclusions reached by Brewerton were that the library needs to put more effort into publicising reading lists and that a formal reading list strategy is needed.

Development of MyReading

In 2008 a review of reading lists at the University of Huddersfield revealed that the library received reading lists for only 40% of modules and that many lists contained out of date or inaccurate information. It also indicated that manual processes for reading list management were laborious and outdated. In summary, a systematic, automated approach was required to tackle these issues and as a result, the MyReading project was launched.

The primary aim of the project was to improve the student experience by providing comprehensive availability of reading lists, giving better access to resources and providing links to the full text of items where possible. Other important aims were to inform collection development, to integrate

reading list management with library acquisition processes and generally to make best use of resources and ensure value for money. The overarching principle informing the project was that the provision of reading lists should become a managed, positive experience for staff and students.

Two project groups were set up to achieve these aims. The first was a Steering Group, chaired by the Pro-Vice Chancellor for Teaching and Learning and comprising senior managers from the library and academics, which gave a strategic direction to the project. The second was a Technical Group, which was tasked with delivery of the project and was composed of library managers and subject librarians.

A review of the RLMS landscape was undertaken in 2009. This revealed that none of the systems on the market at the time would fulfil the interoperability criteria specified by the project team (McGuinn, 2015). Therefore, the decision was taken to build an in-house system. A vital part of the process was the involvement of academic staff through focus groups at an early stage to ascertain their requirements. The views expressed in these groups fed directly into the design of the system.

Once MyReading was ready for launch in the spring of 2011, a call was put out to lecturers to send their lists to the Library by the end of July. If they did this, the Library undertook to transfer reading lists to the new system. This 'pump priming' process was facilitated by project funding, which paid for several recently graduated students to be employed for the summer. At the same time, training was offered to lecturers, both face to face and online. The responsibility for creating and updating lists was handed over to lecturers from August 2011, though the Library continued to offer training and support as well as working to promote MyReading to lecturers and students. In early 2015, in line with the MyReading project plan, the evaluation phase began. This was done partly by scrutinising usage data which could be extracted from MyReading, but a crucial element of the evaluation clearly had to be student feedback.

Methodology

To collect the data, a decision was made to use an online questionnaire (see Appendix 1). It was hoped that this would allow the gathering of information from a large numbers of students on their awareness, usage and opinions of MyReading. The survey was conducted across the seven Schools in the University: Applied Sciences (AS); Art, Design and Architecture (ADA); Business; Computing and Engineering (CandE); Education and Professional Development (EPD); Human and Health Sciences (HHS) and Music Humanities and Media (MHM) over a three week period.

The aim was to make the questionnaire easy for students to complete and therefore to limit the numbers of questions, making it more likely for students to respond. The majority of the questions were closed, making it quick to complete and producing quantitative data which is arguably easier to analyse and compare (Denscombe, 2007).

Another reason for conducting the survey was to give students an opportunity to suggest improvements that could be made to the software in order to take the development of MyReading to the next level. Two open questions were compiled, the first asking students to qualify their answer to the previous question "Do you find your reading lists useful?" and the second asking "How can we make your Reading Lists better for your use?" In addition to the questions, images of a selected reading list, the animation, leaflet and pens were provided for the marketing questions, to

jog students' memories, a practice used with effect by Loughborough University when they surveyed 150 students on their in-house system (Brewerton, 2014b).

After some experimentation, it was decided to use the Qualtrics survey platform to host the questionnaire. The questionnaire was embedded on the the Library's web scale discovery system front page (University of Huddersfield, 2015), also on MyReading modules available through Blackboard. When accessed through MyReading, participation was limited to undergraduate students as they are the students most likely to be using the system. £10 or £20 vouchers for an online shopping store were offered as an incentive. After reaching 240 responses, it became apparent that free access to the Qualtrics platform only allowed 250 responses. The questionnaire was then quickly transferred to Google Forms where a further 522 responses were received. In total, 772 surveys were completed, representing 3.5% of the entire University student population.

To analyse the comments made by students in answer to the two open questions, thematic analysis was deployed.   Boyatzis (1998) describes thematic analysis as:

> …a process for encoding qualitative information. The encoding requires an explicit "code". This may be a list of themes … A theme is a pattern found in the information that at minimum describes and organizes the possible observations and at maximum interprets aspects of the phenomenon (p.4).

Thematic analysis was used in preference to grounded theory developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967), an approach devoted to the development of theories grounded in empirical research (Denscombe, 2007). Arguably, there are different versions of grounded theory (Bryman, 2012; Charmaz, 2006), and Braun and Clarke (2006) criticise studies for using a watered down version that they class as being "grounded theory 'lite'" rather than subscribing to the "full-fat" version, which is concerned with the development of theories (p.81).

Braun and Clarke (2006) emphasise that the theoretical position used by researchers when conducting thematic analysis must be explained. In this study, thematic analysis was used as an "essentialist or realist method" reporting the "experiences, meanings and the reality of participants" (p.81). Themes were identified direct from the comments made by students, termed by Boyatzis as the "manifest level" (p.4) and generated inductively from the data.

Results

Analysis of respondents to the survey by year of study revealed that 37.8% of respondents were first years, 29.9% were second years and 32.3% were third years. Students who responded were from all of the seven University schools. HHS students were the top participants and 28.6% of responses came from this School. Business was the second highest responding School, producing 25.6% followed by MHM with 20.3%. There was then a considerable drop with AS with 9.8%, EPD with 9.6%, ADA with 4.4% and finally CandE with 1.7%.

With regard to the question on awareness of lists, 61.3% of students were very aware of their lists; 24.3% were quite aware; 11.3% knew of them; 2.5% were not very aware and 0.5% had no idea what they were.   Again it was the same top three as before, HHS students were the most aware (33.5%); in this case MHM were the second most aware (23.6%); and Business were the third (20.6%). ADA and CandE were the least aware with just 3.4% and 1.1% respectively.

In response to the question "How often do you use your reading lists?" 32.8% of students claim to use them a lot; 43.8% use them sometimes, 9.2% know they were there, 10% did not use them very often and 4.2% never used them. MHM were the biggest users with 31% followed by HHS with 27.9% and then Business with 23.5%. Of the 4.2% that never used them, 28.1% were from HHS and 28.1% from AS.

When asked "Do you find your reading lists useful?" an overwhelming 87.4% agreed that they did find them useful, with only 7.7% saying they didn't. When asked to explain why they found the reading lists useful 611 of the 768 students responded.

Thematic analysis was used to code the responses and a number of themes for the two particular questions that encouraged a free text response were identified. The two questions were:

- Do you find your Reading Lists useful, if you answered yes or no, why?
- How can we make your Reading Lists better for your use?

There were seven themes identified for the first question, in addition a small number of students stated that they did not use their reading lists. Some found them not to be relevant, others preferred to purchase key texts, although some used their reading list to decide on purchases. The first theme was the perceived helpfulness of reading lists,

> I find the reading lists useful because they help me identify and narrow down the specific areas I need to study to better grasp information and complete my assignments.

Many students commented that they found the lists useful to help them understand a lecture, during assignments and while revising,

> I find that some lectures provide the bones of a particular subject, the reading list provides context for subject area.

The second theme identified was that students like to use reading lists as a starting point for research. Providing access to not only core texts but also to supplementary reading materials identified by tutors, MyReading was perceived by students to give a good base from which to conduct research using trusted information resources.

> Fabulous starting point provided by people who have done wide ranging preliminary research.

The third theme referred to the ease with which the students could use the software and the time saving that this provided.

> Provide[s] me with books which are easily accessible both online and in the library. I know I can access useful information extremely quickly.

The fourth theme was that students valued their reading lists because the items were picked by their tutors, effectively this gave the reading lists a seal of quality,

> I am getting expert advice from my lecturers about relevant reading material.

The fifth theme coved the different categories available in the software and this is a feature that the students found very useful. Comments were subdivided into two sections. Firstly, the division of some lists into weekly reading or by module, which helped students prioritise their reading,

> They allow me to keep track of what I need to read for each week.

In addition, students appreciated the 'essential', 'recommended' and 'background' sections,

> It provides one central location to easily find any required reading material for seminars as well as having a large quantity of additional materials for supplementary study as well as for assignments.

Following on from this, the sixth theme showed that students used the reading lists as a basis for further reading,

> They allow you to read further into the subjects you have covered in lectures and seminars. They have also helped in my academic research for essays.

However, there were no comments regarding wider reading outside of that recommended in the reading lists themselves.

Finally, there were a low number of comments that could be themed as complaints, these ranged from comments regarding missing links, out of date lists and in one case no reading list being available for a module. There were also comments about the lack of books in the library (four). Some students commented on the length of reading lists, while others complained that they were too limited.

> They are too long so it's hard to know where to start. Overwhelming.

The second question received 492 free text responses. Answers from this section can be divided into five broad themes; the first was that 20% of respondents said that no change was required. Secondly, 32% of respondents commented on changes to the lists that they would like to see lecturers make.

This second group can be subdivided into a number of themes that relate to the lecturers' use of the lists rather than the design. For example, 3% of these comments expressed the opinion that the reading lists were "overwhelming" or contained too much content. One revealing comment is,

> I sometimes feel they are revisited to be added to, but are rarely pruned back.

However, 8% felt that they were not long enough. This difference in opinion reveals inconsistencies of practice between lecturers. Another example of this was the sub-theme relating to the use of divisions in the reading lists. This comment summarises these feelings:

> Probably using more headings and adding a little description about the book on the page. Having tutors write a small summary of what we will be using a particular item for would be really useful for organisation.

Students also wanted the lists to be regularly maintained with up-to-date resources and the latest editions provided for each module.   There was also a demand for item types other than books, for example videos and podcasts.

A third theme was training; requests were made for links to be provided from the Summon front page (University of Huddersfield, 2015). However, there is a link, which has been present for nearly two years and therefore this was seen as a training issue for students. Other comments were on areas that teaching staff could have already added within the current version of the software, again this was seen as an area for training academic colleagues on the full functionality of the reading list software.

The fourth theme related to improvements and enhancements that could be made to the reading list software. 27% commented that they felt some form of improvements were in order. This ranged from general comments around improvements to design and structure of the software, such as colour coding, a more interesting "look", use of book cover images and a more user-friendly interface, to requirements for better functionality, such as a download and email option, personalisation and a mobile friendly version. Another sub-theme touched on the location of lists. Many students wanted a link from the student portal, the gateway to university systems, including Blackboard, email, timetables, attendance records and results. Linking to full text documents was also seen as an issue and this is an area that needs further development within the Information Resources team within the Library, which deals with online access and authentication.

Finally, a theme that ran through both questions was the perceived lack of books, indeed, this is a common comment in many library surveys. Some 10% of comments related to this in the second question, however, it is interesting to note that 61% of the comments about the lack of books directly referred to the absence of Ebooks in the collection, rather than asking for more print copies. Is this an indication that many students now prefer Ebooks over print? The library's Collection Management and Development Policy states that, "electronic versions of books on reading lists will be obtained whenever they are available" (University of Huddersfield, 2014), however, the likelihood is that online copies for many books are unavailable due to publisher restrictions.

Discussion and analysis

The methodology outlines a number of key questions that the study sought to answer. Firstly, regarding the student experience of using the lists or their perceived usefulness (see Appendix 1, question 6), comments regarding the length of the lists and the lack of multiple copies of reading list items may indicate that students are being spoon-fed to a certain extent (Siddall and Rose, 2014; Stokes and Martin, 2008). For example, one comment stated,

> …I don't think it is useful to read a whole book and the fact that I am only given the title of the whole book puts me off; I'd like to be told what chapters I have to pay more attention to and when that information will be helpful to me.

However, many students regard MyReading as a starting point to research, which concurs with the findings from Siddall and Rose (2014) and Brewerton (2014a). Therefore this research tends to agree that MyReading is providing the necessary 'scaffolding' for students (Stokes and Martin, 2008). It also seems that students prefer annotated reading lists and that this does enhance their experience (Stokes and Martin, 2008; Piscioneri and Hlavac, 2012).

A number of key themes emerged from the second open question, which looked at possible improvements to the RLMS (Appendix 1, question 7). These will give the team clear guidance as to which parts of the experience to improve. There were comments on the varying quality of lists

> Not all lists are created equal - some tutors create better lists than others. Trying to have a more consistent standard would be helpful.

This needs to be taken on board and further outreach work will be required with academics. A quick win would be to improve the general look and feel of the lists. Comments around the provision of books, both print and electronic are harder to address. There is an important message to textbook publishers here, in that many students expect the library to provide eTextbooks via reading lists and this needs further work.

The final research question looked at the number of replies and the awareness of reading lists at the University by School. This research shows similarities to the work done by the Library Impact Data Project (LIDP) at Huddersfield, which found that ADA and CandE students were low users of library resources (Collins and Stone, 2014). This figure is all the more striking considering that the students who completed the survey were probably more likely to have known about the availability of reading lists and yet the low number of replies still revealed a lack of awareness in these two Schools. The fact that the location of the link to the survey meant those students who were aware of MyReading were more likely to complete the survey is a flaw in the methodology.

In retrospect, one way of capturing more views from students in the known "low engagement" schools would have been to take the survey to them by means of roving activities (Sharman and Walsh, 2012). Future research needs to bring in those that are less engaged both in the Schools identified by LIDP and other Schools too. Indeed, work is already underway to try to improve this within the School of Computing and Engineering (Stone, Sharman, Dunn and Woods, 2015) and this work must involve the publishing of reading lists to promote greater library use.

Conclusions and further work

The vast majority of comments captured by this survey show that students find MyReading to be a valuable resource, which enhances their learning. There is encouragement to be had from the number of comments which pointed to students viewing the reading list not as an essential crutch which they always lean on, but as an important piece of scaffolding which leads to further independent information seeking. This finding is highly positive in terms of evaluation of MyReading's success in its aim of improving the student experience of reading lists. Many of the survey comments were also useful suggestions for future enhancements to MyReading, which the steering group now needs to prioritise and implement.

In terms of barriers which prevent students using their lists to the full, it is clear from the number of comments about lists which are infrequently updated, poorly organised and unhelpfully lengthy that there is more work to be done in terms of training and guidance for lecturers. There is also a need to raise awareness amongst staff of the importance placed on reading lists by students. This echoes the findings of Brewerton (2014a). One of the University's key forums for promoting best practice to lecturers is the University's Teaching and Learning Innovation Park (University of Huddersfield, 2015b). There are already training materials available to lecturers here, but the findings of this study suggest that the resource is currently under-utilised and requires further promotion.

The demographic information gathered reveals low engagement with MyReading in two Schools (CandE and ADA), which echoes the findings of the LIDP (Collins and Stone, 2014). This issue is already being tackled by means of targeted roving in these Schools and desktop visits to academic staff to encourage them to use resources in their teaching and research (Stone, Sharman, Dunn and Woods, 2015). An academic from the School of CandE has also agreed to be a member of the MyReading steering group. Another new engagement initiative already coming to fruition is the appointment of a dedicated (fixed term) Collection Development and Reading Lists Librarian funded by the Business School. The aim of the project is to help staff make better use of MyReading, improve the quality of reading lists and make them more appealing to students.

Possibly the most important finding revealed by the negative comments about list quality is the disappointing lack of engagement with MyReading amongst some lecturers. It is clear therefore that it is in the best interests of students for those who are tasked with providing and maintaining RLMSs to devote their energies not only to developing systems, but also to promoting best practice amongst lecturers. It is essential, if students are to get full value from their RLMS, that lecturers fully adopt it and regard it as a key element of their pedagogy rather than a bolt-on extra.

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Appendix 1: Survey Questions

1. What year of study are you in?

2. Please select which University school you are from.

3. How aware of your Reading Lists are you?

   Very aware

   Quite aware

   I know of them

   Not very aware

   I have no idea what they are

4. How often do you use your Reading Lists?

   I use them a lot

   I use them sometimes

   I know they are there

   I don't use them very often

   I never use them

5. Do you find your Reading Lists useful?

   Yes

   No

   Not applicable

6. If you answered yes, or no to the previous question, why?

7. How can we make your Reading Lists better for your use?

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8. Please select which, if any, of the Reading Lists 'Take your degree to the next level' Promotional materials you have seen.

    Posters

    Animation/Video

    Leaflets

    None of them