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# Reflections on a benchmarking survey of research support provided by 1994 Group libraries



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## INTRODUCTION

In April 2007, the Research Information Network (RIN) and Consortium of University Research Libraries (CURL) published their joint report into researchers' use of academic libraries and their services.<sup>1</sup> This national study raised the profile of research support offered within university libraries, whilst identifying the challenges for librarians and researchers in ensuring effective provision in this key area. Whilst a national survey is very useful for identifying trends and behaviours, a national report includes the Russell Group universities, whose resources and ethos are significantly different from those at Loughborough, so we felt that benchmarking the 1994 Group of 19 internationally renowned research intensive universities<sup>2</sup> best represented our sector and would yield the most meaningful comparisons; a survey was therefore carried out in late 2007.<sup>3</sup> In this article we describe briefly the methodology and the key findings of this study and add to it by reflecting on the opportunities for further investigation into the increasingly important provision of research support.

## METHODOLOGY

There are 19 institutions currently within the 1994 Group and, as the benchmarking survey was undertaken alongside the other duties of the research support team, it was decided that mainly quantitative data should be produced by the survey. To ensure that the questions related to current practice in the majority of the institutions, the websites of the libraries of all of the 1994 Group were scanned, along with a selection of Russell Group libraries which had research interests similar to those at Loughborough. This enabled us to identify the main areas of research support currently offered across the range of institutions and to structure the survey.

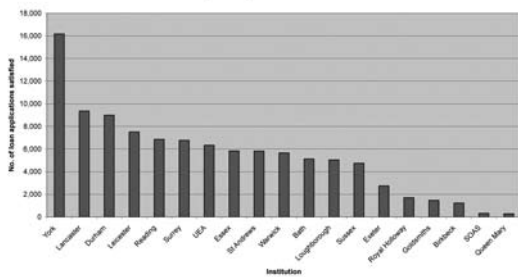
Once the key sections of the survey had been identified, an electronic survey was constructed using UCCASS<sup>4</sup> open source software. It was piloted on colleagues at Loughborough and at Stirling University. Most of the questions invited 'tick box' answers, with space for comment provided at the end of the questionnaire. The academic year 2005–2006 was chosen as the survey year since the data would both be readily available and could be used in conjunction with latest published SCONUL statistics.<sup>5</sup> These statistics were used where relevant to minimise the intrusion on respondents' time. Fourteen responses were received (a response rate of 79%), from the university libraries of Bath, Birkbeck, Durham, Exeter, Goldsmiths, Lancaster, Leicester, Loughborough, Queen Mary, Reading, St Andrews, Surrey, Sussex and York.

## KEY FINDINGS

### *Obtaining materials*

Increasing investment in e-journal provision has reduced the frequency with which researchers visit their libraries and, as both a Loughborough e-journal survey<sup>6</sup> and a RIN survey<sup>7</sup> identified, researchers use a variety of methods to obtain material not available in their own library. Although inter-library lending (ILL) is declining in the numbers of items fulfilled, due to increased availability of electronic full text, SCONUL statistics<sup>8</sup> show that document supply continues to be an important service provided by libraries for researchers. The inter-library loans provided by each 1994 Group library can be compared in Table 1. Drives to make the ILL process more efficient and effective tend to focus on electronic ordering and delivery, and we wanted to know how well established this had become across the 1994 Group.

Table 1  
Interlibrary loans applications satisfied 2005/06



Since the Electronic Communications Act 2000, the acceptance of electronic signatures, as opposed to written personal signatures, has been a moot point within libraries.<sup>9</sup> Some libraries insist on personal signatures for all inter-library loans before requests can be fulfilled. It was therefore interesting to note that 10 of the 14 respondents permitted electronic requests for inter-library loans from their users. Unfortunately our survey did not identify at which point the users would need to physically sign to obtain the item or if electronic signatures were used, and this is an area which we intend to follow up to inform our own service.

Secure Electronic Delivery (SED) was only well established in three of the libraries, although one reported that it was used for 100 per cent of staff requests. We wonder why this is so when both the RIN survey<sup>10</sup> and our own in-house survey last year<sup>11</sup> demonstrated that many researchers prefer accessing journals electronically rather than using the print equivalent. It could be linked to internal marketing within libraries or it could be that the restrictions imposed by the service are off-putting to the user. It is an area that merits further investigation and one which we intend to take forward in our next survey of our own researchers.

One of the services that had been identified as being offered in one of the Russell Group libraries – and that, anecdotally, was popular with their researchers – was the delivery of newly purchased books or inter-library loan books to a researcher's departmental address. At the moment this service is not offered by any of the 1994 Group libraries that responded to the questionnaire but we would be very interested to know how many other universities beyond the 1994 Group are offering this service, so that we can assess the feasibility and popularity of such a service.

#### *Mediated searching of databases*

Mediated searching of 'pay as you use' databases from hosts such as Questel-Orbit and Dialog was offered by four universities out of the 14 respondents and, of these, only two fulfilled more than

ten searches in 2005–2006. However, mediated searching of 'free at point of use' databases was also offered at four institutions, with all of these reporting more than 20 searches in 2005–2006. We suspect that this mismatch in popularity is linked to the fact that the 'pay as you use' databases are much lower-profile and are niche products, whilst the 'free at point of use' ones are providing more of the information that researchers need on a regular basis, but that the researchers are too time-pressured to be able to do their own research. We followed up these results with the institution with the highest number of searches and found that the researchers requesting these services were from two specific medical-related areas, one of which was staffed by practitioners who would not have the time to do such work. It was also interesting to note that this institution's policy was to move away from mediated searching where possible.

#### *Special collections*

Although special collections are not an immediate priority for Loughborough, we felt that others in the 1994 Group might be interested to see to what extent others were involved in digitisation projects. Of the 14 institutions that responded, six had digitised some of their special collections. The majority of institutions also had plans to digitise at least some of their collections, although only two had the funds in place. Only four institutions stated that they had no plans for digitisation. This illustrates the importance that libraries are placing on increasing access to their collections and how it goes across a wide range of institutions. The fact that so few had funds in place is interesting, if not surprising. The will to digitise is definitely there, but not the finance.

#### *Electronic reference*

Although e-reference products are used by a range of users within an institution, our experience has shown that they are often requested by researchers who no longer want to travel to the library building to use the traditional, printed reference collection. We wanted an indication as to how much libraries were investing in e-reference and our results showed big differences between institutions. In 2005–2006, the majority of our respondents (8) spent over £20,000 on electronic reference materials; two spent between £10,001 and 20,000; one spent between £5,001 and £10,000; and three spent less than £5,000.

Unfortunately (and naturally) this does not tell us to what extent researchers are using these products, or even to what extent any users are using the services. The higher expenditure could

be linked to the purchase of large services, such as the suite of Oxford Reference Online products, which are not all necessarily aimed at researchers and in some cases could be seen as an attempt to wean students away from reliance on Wikipedia. In retrospect, it might have been more helpful to benchmark against specific products that are aimed more specifically at researchers, such as the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography.

#### *Reference management*

Bibliographic software is becoming increasingly important and familiar to researchers. In some institutions the software itself might be provided by IT departments but the support, as our survey results showed, is usually offered by the library. All of the respondents actively supported at least one product.

The most popular software was Endnote, which was provided by 12 institutions, and its cut-down web version offered by ISI, Endnote Web, was also offered by seven institutions. Refworks and Reference Manager were both offered by three institutions. Nine institutions offered their users a choice of two or more products, although only five actively supported more than one. It would be interesting to follow this up to find out how much support the five provide for more than one product. The reliance on Endnote is also worth noting and it would be helpful to know if this was a decision based on functionality or whether it is simply historic. It is also useful for institutions which do not currently have Endnote to be aware that researchers coming in from elsewhere might need some extra support to get used to a new system, if they are prepared to use it.

#### *Training available to researchers*

Training of researchers from PhD level upwards received added incentive after the Roberts Review.<sup>12</sup> Indeed one of the respondents mentioned Roberts-funded sessions as one type of training offered. The survey results indicated that a wide range of training was available via the 1994 Group libraries.

All 14 institutions offered literature-searching training, with bibliographic software/reference management training provided by 12. Current-awareness training was the next most popular session, with 10 institutions providing this. Five institutions offered training on how to get the most from the Web or Web 2.0. It was interesting to note that topics that are not traditionally seen as library-based are also being provided by the libraries. These included avoiding plagiarism

(offered by 4 libraries), where to publish (2), copyright (2) and institutional repositories (2). Other topics, each offered by one library, were:

- special-collection awareness
- open-access publishing
- an introduction to e-journals
- self-assessment and career choices
- marking and giving feedback
- careers inside and outside academia
- CVs and applications and interview skills.

All except one library offered researchers training on more than one topic. The greatest number of topics offered was over nine, including a session on 'who's citing whom', which is a topic that might increase in popularity, depending on decisions about the format of the Research Excellence Framework (REF). This shows to what extent many librarians are having to develop their skills beyond the traditional information-literacy remit and it would be interesting to follow this up again in a few years' time to see to what extent it continues to change.

#### *Dedicated research space*

One question that was recently raised by a Loughborough researcher was about the availability of dedicated research space, since a couple of years ago we dedicated one of our levels to an area called Open 3. This is a space where users can work, eat, drink and talk and it is predominately used by students. It has made some researchers feel a bit uncomfortable, as it is so alien to the traditional view of a research library, whilst others love the fact that it has made the library so lively! Our survey showed that the availability of research space within the libraries was quite mixed. The most common form of dedicated research space provided by the libraries, apart from open reading places, was the group study room, which was available in 11 of the 14 responding libraries and could be booked in advance at 8 of these. Groups rooms were only available exclusively for researchers in two institutions.

Individual study rooms were available in seven libraries and could be booked in advance in five. They were for the exclusive use of researchers in only one institution. In the majority of libraries, 11 out of the 14, there was no research space reserved exclusively for researchers, and three libraries did not have any individual study rooms, group study rooms or space which they consider to be equivalent to this. It would be interesting to investigate this aspect further to discover how researchers in the institutions felt about this situation and

whether it is a result of the libraries responding to the lack of visits from researchers or whether the researchers do not feel that the library has the appropriate space to attract them to visit.

#### *Support for the RAE*

Given the funds that rest on a successful Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) submission, it is unsurprising that library support for them was offered by most libraries. The most popular form of support was finding bibliographic data (9 libraries) and nine libraries also offered advice on how to find Digital Object Identifiers (DOIs), which were a feature of RAE2008. Help on how to publish was offered by two libraries. Other assistance included collation of data, hard-copy sources and the training of administrators. As the RAE preparation is now history and institutions await the result, librarians will need to keep watching the developments with the REF to decide how to adapt their services to the new environment.

#### *Results on dedicated research support librarians*

With research support increasing in prominence within libraries, we wanted to know how many libraries had employed a dedicated research support librarian. Five universities indicated that they had someone whose role was dedicated to research support, and again it would be good to take this investigation further to find out exactly what their role entailed and to see if this number increases over time. From our survey it is not possible to determine whether these libraries are more effective in research support and clearly the other libraries may see their pre-existing staffing structures as robust enough to support research effectively.

#### *Management of research outputs*

The survey results suggested strongly that the open-access movement was supported by the majority of the respondents. Most respondents (12 out of 14) stored research papers electronically and a further one is launching its institutional repository in spring 2008. However, whilst institutional repositories are increasingly commonplace, the survey showed that submission of electronic theses and research data was relatively rare. Only two of the institutions had electronic theses available and only two were storing research data. As the storage of data on open access is a subject that has only recently become high-profile and is contentious within some subject areas because of ethical and technical concerns, these results were not surprising.<sup>13</sup>

With hindsight we should have obtained data on the numbers of full-text papers contained in each institutional repository to determine how well stocked they were and should also have discovered to what extent submission of each type of document is mandated by the institutions. When we looked at a sample of the institutional repositories in March 2008, we found that the numbers of items stored ranged from 301 to 2,697.

#### *Support for e-research*

One area that appears to be a bit of mystery to librarians is support for e-research. Is it, or should it be, any different to the support that is provided to individual researchers in a department or not? The responses to our open questions showed that there is little to indicate that libraries have revolutionised their service provision to accommodate e-research so far. Most responses demonstrated the same approach as applied to 'normal' research. Two comments may suggest that e-research is also being viewed as a slightly different area, however:

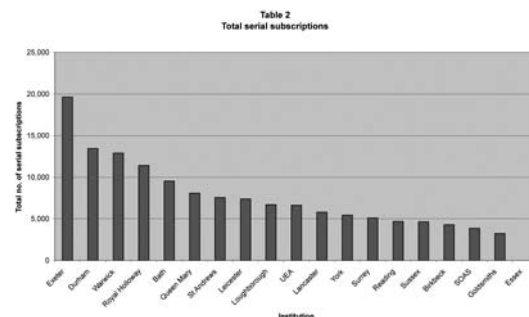
'Under discussion with research departments but support underdeveloped at present'

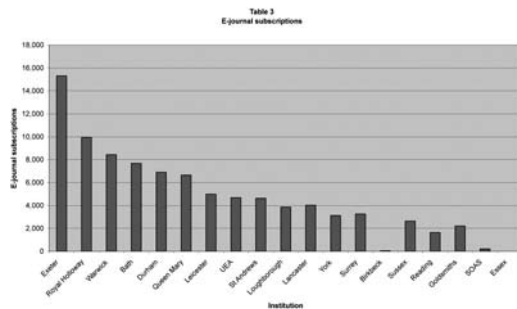
'Assistance with individual research-related enquiries. However, we are planning to offer an entirely new research-orientated library facility within the next few years.'

This is an area on which we will be keeping a watching brief.

### **SCONUL STATISTICS**

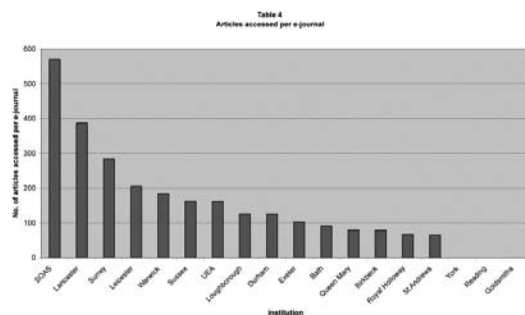
Moving away from the survey itself, the annual SCONUL statistics for serials, inter-library loans and e-journal downloads were examined to see the quantity of e-journals available in the different libraries, with the inter-library-loan totals and downloads being taken as indicators as to the effectiveness or quality of the titles. It is interesting to note the variations in number of serials across 1994 Group libraries. See Table 2 for total serial subscriptions and Table 3 for e-journal subscriptions. (Figures are included for all the 1994 Group libraries, not just those that responded to the questionnaire.)





These figures, of course, reflect an institution's mix of courses and strength in science and technology subjects will tend to lead to high numbers of electronic subscriptions due to researcher demand. A medical or law school will also ensure that it fulfils the need to supply large numbers of titles.

The e-journal downloads are a new feature in SCONUL statistics this year and an attempt has been made to measure the impact of e-journal subscriptions by dividing the number of successful downloads by the number of e-journals. This measure could be used to indicate how effective academic libraries are either in choosing appropriate titles to support their researchers or in guiding researchers to articles they need (perhaps using and promoting link resolver technology). Table 4 shows how our libraries fare in this and illustrates that a smaller number of carefully chosen journals can be very effective in providing researchers with what they need.



It has been pointed out that, traditionally, research libraries have been measured by the strength of their collections and recently e-journal bundles have provided a useful 'long tail' of journals to develop collections in areas that would not necessarily have been financed before, and that sometimes attract surprising levels of use.

## CONCLUSION

We found the benchmarking survey to be a very helpful exercise for scoping the landscape of research support in the libraries of the 1994 Group and for supplying us with data to identify our own library's strengths and weaknesses. We hope

that the other 1994 Group libraries have also been able to use it to refine or improve their practice. It has provided us with the foundations to focus in on specific areas that need more thorough investigation and to look more closely at the quality of our support. Therefore on a practical level we now have a long list of recommendations to guide our next year's operational plan, completion of which will ensure that we achieve an enhanced level of research support. Having undertaken this benchmarking survey, we now know that this support will be comparable to, or better than, that in universities of a similar size and ethos to our own.

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