Reading lists – pitching it right!

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An overview

Every year Durham University library approaches academic staff who teach on taught modules in departments and asks them to submit a copy of their reading list, with the resources that they intend to recommend to students. Although the library aims to make these items more accessible by making lists of the resources available to students online and ensuring that the library has access to sufficient copies of core texts, response to the request for lists is not as good as it could be, so we decided to see if there was something we could do to combat this.

Alongside an overhaul of the reading-list process, a promotional campaign was planned to run from the end of May 2010 until the end of January 2011. The aim was to target both academics and students in order to promote taught-course provision and to improve the library’s records management of these activities.
THE CURRENT PROCESS

The procedure for acquiring and processing reading lists at Durham University library has been developed and improved over the course of the last few years. By March 2010 we had:

- a formalised, regular process for the submission of lists
- an in-house process for checking and applying a purchasing model to all taught-course material
- electronic copies of lists available both via the library web pages and embedded in each module on the virtual learning environment (Blackboard)
- a process for scanning, digitising and deep-linking to appropriate taught-course resources.

We also needed to better quantify the work we do for taught courses. Transparency has never been more pertinent. Simply citing the numbers of reading lists received as a percentage of total modules was misleading in the context of defining the totality of the work undertaken to support taught courses. In 2009/10 we reported receiving 63% of undergraduate lists. However, this didn’t take account of:

- digitisation requests for taught courses
- standalone book orders for taught courses
- occasions when we had altered materials’ loan categories at lecturers’ requests.

The ‘percentage of reading lists received’ figure’ only provides partial feedback – we wanted to be able to demonstrate how the library does a lot more than that for taught courses. We readdressed how we recorded statistics and outlined a strategy for further improving our provision of support. Figure 1 illustrates the existing arrangement.

THE REVISED PROCESS

A small team – made up of the authors of this article – would coordinate the support for taught courses. No additional staff would be available to help with the processes and some staff training would be necessary. The amalgamation of the ‘digitisation requests’ and ‘reading lists’ mailboxes would ensure a central contact point and as simple a process as possible for the end-user. Web pages were to be re written. At the centre of the new process, a database would hold information on all the support provided specifically for taught modules. This information was previously partially recorded in a number of places and rarely cross-referenced. Not only would this be able to provide evidence of how we support taught modules, but it would help us to target modules that we currently receive little information about, thus supporting what should be the primary aim of any university library – providing the appropriate materials in appropriate quantities.

Given this, we felt our biggest challenge was one of advocacy. Could we increase the usage of the online reading lists that we have worked hard to
produce? Could we communicate to academic staff who are reluctant to engage with the process the fact that working with the library has benefits?

**Promoting the model**

The plans to revise the process were initially taken to the library’s senior management team (LSMT) for approval, and before finalising the process we discussed the recommended changes with key library colleagues, taking on board the comments and suggestions they had. The new ‘Resources for courses’ strategy gained support from the acquisitions, academic support and bibliographic services teams, so we were confident that all significant colleagues had been consulted.

At university level, a small working group had been created to look at the reading-list process, focusing on improving departmental submission of lists in a timely matter. A member of the ‘Resources for courses’ team was invited onto this working group and has been able to inform the group members of the changes made this academic year, thus giving us the opportunity to publicise what we are doing with reading lists at a higher level. To further promote the improvements we have made to the course-resources process across the university, we had an article published this summer in *Dialogue*, the university’s news magazine.¹

The revised arrangement would, we hoped, lead to a greater understanding for all of what the library provides for every taught module, with less duplication of effort between digitisation and reading-list work. It would be a further opportunity for cross-team working, with transparent records of quantifiable work. It would offer an opportunity to target specific departments and modules and for renewed attempts at advocacy, with less confusion for university staff over both whom to contact and what we do. Figure 2 illustrates the revised arrangement.

**The marketing campaign**

In a move away from previous methods, we wanted a different aspect to the advocacy strategy and focused on what the library could do to help. To ensure the campaign was memorable we decided to create a range of images and themes that users could easily identify as part of it and that could be used subsequently on e-mails, posters, computer screensavers, plasma screens and the website, to tie together what we were trying to achieve. We emphasised that once the lists were received the onus would be on the library to do the leg work in making sure resources matched what was being recommended on courses, firmly embedding library services with student satisfaction, a key priority for all academics.

**Digitisation**

Under the CLA (Copyright Licensing Agency) licence a scanning service is offered by the library and scans are made available via the VLE for particular courses. In addition, the digitisation
team has provided deep links to journal articles
to which we have an electronic subscription.
We were conscious that take-up for digitisation
requests – although they are already popular
– could be promoted further and could be inte-
grated into the summer reading-list process. The
digitisation service would then be promoted in
the course-resources campaign, along with read-
ing lists, with e-mails, flyers, posters and screens-
savers, highlighting that these digital resources
would be integrated into the online reading
lists and providing one location for all course
resources.

Contacts
An up-to-date contacts list was created by gather-
ing information from liaison librarians and digiti-
sation service correspondence; this was essential
before the campaign could begin so that we could
target the relevant people in each department. As
part of this process, we also identified primary
and secondary contacts, in case we needed to
chase individuals for recommended resources. As
we were creating a new database for recording
each step of the course-resources process, brief-
ings and training were arranged for all the library
assistants involved in the reading-list processing
at all campuses. This was positively received
because we could clearly explain the rationale for
change and show the benefits it would have in
their work and for the university as a whole.

The campaign
The marketing campaign began
with initial posters entitled ‘Your
Library needs you’ and ‘Digitised
Materials: are your students satis-
fied?’ being sent to the primary
library contact, along with a cover-
ing note on university-headed
paper to ensure it was received as
an official university campaign.3 This was sup-
plemented with an e-mail a week later headed
‘Ensure student satisfaction – get your reading list
in on time’, with the flyers for ‘Your Library needs
you!’ and ‘Digitised materials’ attached.

To ensure that we had reached as much of our
audience as possible, a news item ran on the
library website4 and a plasma-screen marketing
campaign aimed at academics began in June, to
run until the end of July, with the same images
from the posters and flyers.

Although the service aimed to simplify the proc-
ess for academics and to highlight the benefits
of submitting lists in time, with the appeal of
ensuring student satisfaction, we
were prepared to chase those who
did not send out their recom-
mendations! At the end of July
a ‘Time is running out!’ poster
was sent to the secondary library
contact, along with covering note
on university-headed paper for
all departments that had still
not submitted their reading lists.
This was again supplemented with an e-mail to
identify specifically which modules we were yet
to receive reading lists for. Once again, to reach as
wide an audience a possible a further news item
was posted on the library website entitled ‘Time
is running out!’ and a plasma-screen marketing
campaign continued for academics throughout
August and September.4

Still to come
After all the work to get recommended reading
lists in from academics, what we had noticed in
the past was that students did not know what we
had been doing on their behalf. So by September
of 2010 we are planning to start the second phase
of the marketing strategy with the launch of a
new web page for students, informing them that
‘It’s a piece of cake ... to find your reading lists
online.’ This will be supplemented with a news
item on the library website5 and an e-mail to all
students with the tag line ‘Still lost? Finding your
reading list online is a piece of cake!’ To reinforce
the message, screensavers
for students will go on PCs
and on the plasma screens,
and will be alternated
throughout Michaelmas
term. Themes will include
‘It’s a piece of cake’; ‘Lost?’; ‘Discover’; ‘Core read-
ing’ and ‘Stumped’.

The total success of the exercise has yet to be
evaluated. As of 1 August 2010, we had received
twice as many reading lists as at the same point
in 2009. The concerted efforts of the ‘Resources
for courses’ team and a university-wide endorse-
ment of the importance of the process have given
a renewed focus to this library activity and have
reinforced the value-added potential of the library
to support any taught course.

For more details see: http://www.dur.ac.uk/
library/course_resources/
References

1 http://www.dur.ac.uk/dialogue/
2 Kitchener image obtained from: http://www.vads.ac.uk/large.php?uid=29471&sos=0
3 http://www.dur.ac.uk/library/news/?itemno=10098
4 Referee image (and cake image below) obtained from Microsoft Office clip art: http://office.microsoft.com/en-gb/images/?lc=en-gb&ofcresset=1
5 http://www.dur.ac.uk/library/news/?itemno=10098

All web sites accessed August 2010.