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Can online reading lists achieve meaningful engagement with the academics and students within a digital landscape? A case study from the University of West London

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## **CAN ONLINE READING LISTS ACHIEVE MEANINGFUL ENGAGEMENT WITH THE ACADEMICS AND STUDENTS WITHIN A DIGITAL LANDSCAPE? A CASE STUDY FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF WEST LONDON**

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

The Higher Education (HE) library sector in the UK has demonstrated a visible change in the way it delivers its content and service keeping in view changing user behaviours and emerging technologies (Ball, 2016). Rapid uptake of online reading lists (Chad, 2018), which are integrated into institutional learning management systems as well as library management systems, has opened new avenues of resource discovery and digital engagement.

In the study by Newman, Beetham & Knight (2018) which was conducted by UK JISC (Joint Information Systems Committee), the UK organisation providing digital solutions for education and research, data was collected from 23,428 3rd year HE students in UK to understand their expectations and experiences of technology. The authors found that students in HE are reliant on digital technologies and 95% of them find information online using various digital tools and apps on a weekly basis. This study also revealed that digital learning helps students understand things better, enjoy learning more, be more independent and engage more with their studying.

Interpretation of engagement within the digital landscape is different for every stakeholder. For academics, this indicates the need to create engaging, annotated reading lists extending students' knowledge. For students, this seems to indicate they heavily utilise

digital learning resources during their research and studies. For library staff, online reading lists means improved liaison with academics staff to enable the library to provide learning resources in print (and electronic format where available) in a way that is more effective and more relevant.

The aim of this research was firstly to determine to what extent students and academics are engaging with the online reading lists in the view of Academic Support Librarians (ASLs). Secondly, to explore the views and perceptions of academics from the School of Computing and Engineering (SCE) regarding the reading lists in order to determine how to improve their engagement. Thirdly, to determine whether the quantitative data analysis is consistent with the qualitative analysis and feedback.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Chad (2018) states, that most UK university libraries use the ‘software as a service’ (SaaS) model for the reading lists. In the early days of technology-enabled reading lists, Stokes and Martin (2008) argued that despite the scarcity of scholarly literature, reading lists should still be regarded as an essential resource to support student learning and independent study within the emerging digital landscape of HE. Historically, paper-based reading lists had been the main guide to course resources, chosen and recommended by lecturers and handed to students in module packs or during teaching sessions. With the development of new technologies, universities were starting to think about how to create learning experiences and enriched environments for digital learning which could meet the needs of the future student. (Derven, 2011).

Recent scholarly and professional literature published on resource discovery and digital engagement has covered various subjective aspects of meaningful engagement. This includes evidence-based acquisition of library resources (Cameron & Siddall, 2015), academic engagement with students (Siddall & Rose, 2014), student engagement with library resources curated by academics (McGuinn, Stone, Sharman, & Davison, 2017), and the engagement of academics with the library (Bartlett, 2010).

Successful outcomes seem to require academics engage with the online reading lists system first, as they need to create their own reading lists. It is only then that students will engage with online reading lists (Atkinson, Conway, & Taylorson, 2011; Brewerton, 2013; Cross, 2015). Jones (2009) also states that: “Academics are the drivers of reading list systems

in that they actually create and maintain reading lists. Without widespread academic participation any standard system would fail” (p.12). Taylor (2017) discusses the University of Worcester in a case study where library staff and academics achieved proactive interaction with the students through use of online reading lists. Taylor thus highlights the pedagogical and engagement potential of Talis Aspire reading lists system with students. Masson (2009) suggests that reading list software offers the potential to circumvent the passivity of traditional print reading lists. He states that: “The emergence of collaborative resource list tools that support the development process and user tagging will transform the utility of the resource list from a static reference tool to a scaffolding learning support activity” (p.223). Siddall and Rose (2008) suggest that annotated and technologically enhanced reading lists can be used as a pedagogical tool.

### 3. INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT

University of West London (UWL) is a strategically ambitious and competitive higher education provider for 13,000 students (UWL, 2019) and is ranked as a 50th university nationally by the Guardian University Guide 2019. The latest employment indicators published by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (2018) show that 98% of UWL graduates are in employment or further study within six months of graduating, placing UWL in the top 10 for employability in the UK.

In 2017, the high standard of teaching and £50 million investment in physical and digital resources used by students to enhance learning was recognised with a Silver Award in the Teaching Excellence Framework (UWL, 2019).

In recent years, university libraries in the UK had been implementing latest technologies to continuously improve student engagement in the library digital space. In 2016, the UWL Library services strategy (Wales, 2016) advocated that as well as delivering modern physical spaces, new student-facing technologies were also required to boost digital engagement of students and academics with library resources.

### 4. ONLINE READING LISTS AT UWL

Talis Aspire is the most popular reading lists application in the UK HE sector (Chad, 2018). An advantage of Talis Aspire is that it integrates well with VLEs and library management systems (Chad, 2010).

The UWL library purchased Talis Aspire software in 2012 branding it UWLReadingLists system. The main aim was to deliver an improved student experience and better access to the library resources. A 'soft' approach was opted into introducing academics to UWLReadingLists and encouraging them to create their own online reading lists. Group and individual training was offered to all academics. Some resistance from individuals and low attendance at training sessions resulted in only 4% of possible reading lists being created in academic year (AY) 2013/14.

Due to low uptake, the Library changed its approach. The aim for AY 2015/16 was to ensure that 100% of UWL reading lists were available online before the start of term. It was decided the quickest way to get reading lists onto the system would be for librarians to create them. As a result, ASLs have created 810 online reading lists with academics creating 42 lists. In total 69% of online reading lists were created.

In the following year, the Library gained support from the university's senior management to make UWLReadingLists the definitive source of information about resources for each module for current and prospective students, validations and course approvals. Academics were now required to create and update their own online reading lists as part of teaching preparation. Consequently, the Library staff dedicated their time towards getting academics and students more engaged with UWLReadingLists. To encourage take up of the system by academics, the Library produced guides and offered 1-2-1 and group training sessions. All students during inductions and information literacy sessions were introduced to UWLReadingLists. Librarians used every opportunity to demonstrate to academics and students the benefits of using the system and ran university wide sessions on improving reading list quality.

Within the library, a new group formed to work on new ways of promoting and engaging students and staff with the system. As a result, 93% of modules had online reading lists attached to Blackboard for the AY 2016/17, 98% for 2017/18 and 100% for 2018/19.

Currently, the Library focus on liaison with academics on the quality of online reading lists, their structure and currency, and help them to create annotated lists with contextual guidance. Well-structured and annotated reading lists with plenty of explanation and signposting were found to be invaluable to students and can help to build their confidence

as independent learners as well as improving their information literacy skills (Siddall & Rose, 2014).

The Library services team proactively encourages academics to engage with inclusive reading lists through consideration of what types of students enrol at UWL, their background, diversity and current knowledge.

## 5. METHODOLOGY

Both qualitative and quantitative research methods were used in this research. As part of the quantitative methodology, different data sets were analysed using main data reporting mechanisms: Google Analytics, Talis Aspire reports and analytics. Use of the statistics generated by the Google Analytics is a popular practice in the library sector, as these provide insights into user behaviour and content popularity of different library resources (Cohen & Thorpe, 2015). In this research Google Analytics were used to measure usage of UWLReadingLists. Data on number of users and sessions was compared year on year in the same time frame. Talis Aspire reports and analytics were used to measure the uptake of UWLReadingLists system and gain useful and granular insight into what resources are on the reading lists and how students access them.

80 UWLReadingLists representing different courses, subjects, levels of studies and the diversity of the list owners were investigated to determine the content types, structure, and if reading lists provide contextual guidance to students.

Semi-structured interviews with eight ASLs were used to gather qualitative textual data. This method offered a flexibility of structure (Devlin, 2018) and was used to determine how students and academics are engaging with the UWLReadingLists from their perspective.

To gain a better understanding of how academics engage with UWLReading Lists, their views on the purpose of reading lists, experiences and how the Library services can improve support for academics, the online survey via Microsoft Forms was sent to all academics from the SCE. A total of 25 respondents replied to the survey (78% of the survey sample).

Collins and Elves (2018) have suggested that cognitive maps can be effective in generating and capturing the qualitative data from the respondents in a research within the context of a UK university library. A cognitive mapping exercise was used with 23 academics (72%) from the same school in order to better understand academics' perception of reading

lists. Each academic was given an A4 piece of paper with short instructions and were required to draw an answer to the question ‘What does the reading list mean to you?’ Academics were asked to alternate the colour of pens every two minutes for a total of three colours over six minutes given to draw the answer to that question. After six minutes were completed academics were asked to label the features on the map and explain their drawings. The presumption was made that the first thing the academic drew would be the most important to them (Priestner & Borg, 2016).

## 6. FINDINGS

In the last 4 years the number of times users accessing the UWLReadingLists system has increased by 344%.

64% of SCE academic staff have been teaching at UWL for 5 years or less contrasting with 16% who had over 15 years teaching experience at UWL. Although 64% were comparatively new to UWL, 28% have less than 1 years’ experience of teaching at UWL. The majority of academic staff taught between 11 – 15 hours per week (64%) or between 5 to 10 hours (20%).

The main purpose of reading lists identified by academic staff surveyed was to extend the students’ knowledge of lecture topics (96%) and help stimulate students to read (96%), with the former having the strongest agreement. Those results were confirmed by analysing common themes which emerged during the cognitive maps exercise. During this exercise, the majority of academics perceived reading lists as beneficial for the following reasons:

- A tool to signpost students to relevant and specific material to the module.
- Help for students to get access to various online resources
- Extend knowledge of students
- Help for students to reach their targets

84% of respondents to the survey agreed that reading lists can be used as a pedagogical tool, with only 36% strongly agreeing. Those results could suggest academics are not fully aware of the capabilities of reading lists and their potential to develop academic skills.

88% of academics agreed that students, as they progress through their course, require less support to be critical independent thinkers. This concurred with the findings of ASLs who felt that students at lower levels of undergraduate study needed more guidance. There

was a concern noted by some ASLs that reading lists can limit the amount of independent searching and the development of evaluative skills. However, the majority of ASLs agreed that reading lists which are well structured, annotated and offering guidance could help students become more independent learners, develop their digital literacy, and engage more with their studies.

33% of academics at SCE add additional information to the reading lists to explain why the source is important. These academics teach modules on Engineering courses and teach more than 11 hours a week. The majority of them (67%) had teaching experience of more than 11 years. Interestingly, 80% of academics in SCE who do not add additional information to online reading lists teach in Computing subject areas. Analysis of 80 randomly selected online reading lists across all courses revealed that only 26% of reading lists had annotations or further guidance. It suggests that academics from the SCE are more likely to annotate than the average.

Where there was more divergence of opinion was how academic staff encourage usage of reading lists, with 12% of academics feeling it was up to the student to find their own reading. Those 12% of academics tended to be staff who had the most teaching experience. In contrast, 76% made references to the reading list within their lectures and 24% went further by setting reading tasks and connecting the reading list to assessment exercises. 67% of those academics have taught at UWL for less than 5 years. All ASLs confirmed mentioning reading lists within inductions and information literacy teaching. When supporting students from other schools, they relied on the reading list as a starting point for their support. Only 16% of academics felt that the reading lists supplied all the reading that the student would need for the module, with 84% expecting the students to read additional material. This confirms academics cognitive map drawings that they see the reading list as a starting point for guiding students to additional material.

When deciding on resources to include in the reading lists, currency was the most important factor (72%), followed by availability in the library (56%), appropriate level (56%) and classic texts for the discipline (56%).

Only 16% felt that cost or whether the text reflects the diversity of the student population was of significant importance. 79% of staff recommended additional texts. Reasons for this included:

- Responding to student's questions in class
- Signposting web sources used to directly support the session

- New books being published after the reading list was created
- Encouraging students to become more independent researchers

During the cognitive map exercise, academics often referred to reading lists which helped students discover sources in different formats. Results from the survey showed that books /ebooks were the most popular format for inclusion (96%) and there was lower usage of digitised chapters/articles or audio-visual material (40% never including these). A randomly selected sample of 80 reading lists from all subject areas showed that 66% of lists had other formats as well as books/ebooks included. A possible explanation for these results may be that other courses at UWL require differing formats of material. It is known, as Brewerton (2014) suggests, that engineering lists consist mainly of books, whereas humanities reading lists make greater use of articles.

44% of academics update their online reading lists as and when needed, 40% do this task every semester and 16% once a year which suggests that the content on the majority of lists do not remain static.

88% of academics were familiar with the UWLReadingLists system but only 52% were confident about creating lists. The less confident were a mixture of new staff and staff who had taught for more than 11 years at UWL. Overall 60% had attended training on the system, predominantly group training (63%) or individual (44%). One person was self-taught using an e-guide and another person was self-taught via a video.

When it came to the creation of the online reading lists, 74% of academics had asked the librarian for help. The main reason identified for this was lack of time (60%) and not being confident with the software (33%). One person noted that reading lists were unimportant to them. In the semi-structured interviews the ASLs all agreed that most academics rely on the librarian to create the online version, though there was a spectrum of practice. ASLs noted that initially, academics tended to be eager users of the UWLReadingLists system but lack of regular usage led to forgetfulness loss of confidence. Thus ASLs identified it can be quicker in the long run for librarians to input and maintain reading lists.

According to Brewerton (2014) reading lists need to be “mobile friendly for the modern student” (p. 6). However, Google Analytics for UWL highlight that only 7% of users access UWLReadingLists through mobile devices whilst 88% of user access them via the VLE.

The academic staff were asked to comment on how they think students use reading lists. There was a range of views expressed. The highest amount identified a lack of engagement from some students, although they felt that some students had good engagement with them (9 comments). 4 comments related to the role of the reading list helping with assessments; 2 commented on students linking the reading to lectures; 2 comments on using them to learn more on the topics and 2 comments on using them to find the recommended texts to read.

In semi-structured interviews the ASLs were asked about the core benefits of online reading lists and comments included: direct links to e-material; reduces time; real time availability and to help the library with collection development.

## 7. CONCLUSION

Some conclusions may be drawn from the analysis, the quantitative data, survey responses and cognitive map exercises which may be useful to help evaluate best practice.

The quantitative data shows the increased usage of UWLReadingLists which indicate that students engage with the system. However, further study could be done on students' perceptions and expectations of online reading lists.

The responses from the survey and cognitive map exercise indicate that academics' understanding of reading lists include extending students' knowledge of lecture topics, helping stimulate students to read, as a tool to signpost students to relevant and specific material to the module, helping students to get access to various online resources and helping students to reach their targets.

However, findings seem to indicate that library staff need to offer more support and training for academics to encourage use of the UWLReadingLists system as a pedagogical tool, since only a third of respondents provide annotations and further guidance and 12% of academics felt that it was up to student to find their own reading.

Further analysis of quantitative and qualitative data identified a number of issues to be considered. Firstly, only half of the academics responding to the survey feel comfortable using the system whilst 60% attended training. Secondly, the majority of academics ask librarian for help creating and managing online reading lists, which suggests the original concept of academics being responsible for their own reading lists has not become common practice. The main constraints academics identified are; pressures of time; lack of training

and confidence to fully engage with UWLReadingLists. Finally, analysing cognitive maps, it seemed evident that academics were not aware of the process behind ordering/purchasing library resources and their own role in this process.

This study appears to demonstrate the vital importance of an effective and evolving relationship between the library and academic staff. Hopefully, the results of the cognitive map exercise gave participants the opportunity to reflect on their engagement with reading lists within the digital landscape. In conclusion, UWL Library has succeeded in the initial process of engaging academics and students, but it is vital now to maintain and develop this engagement. Further studies with other subject areas are needed to benchmark practice in other schools/colleges at UWL.

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#### Abstract

The University of West London Library implemented the Talis Aspire Reading Lists system to improve student experience and access to library resources. This case study attempts to evaluate to what extent students and academics are engaging with the system, by exploring the views and perceptions of both Academic Support Librarians and academics from an individual school.

This article concludes that UWL Library has succeeded in the initial process of engaging academics and students, but it is vital now to maintain and develop this engagement. Although qualitative data shows the increased usage of online reading lists, further study could be beneficial to explore students' perceptions and expectations of online reading lists and investigate the views of academics from other schools.