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Implementing a reading list strategy at The University of Manchester – determination, collaboration and innovation

Reading lists are a fundamental part of any programme and it is essential that libraries and academic colleagues work in partnership to ensure that universities are able to provide students with ready access to key information resources. It is generally recognized that today's students have higher expectations than in the past, in part as a result of paying fees. At The University of Manchester 91% of 1,446 students consulted as part of an independent library survey responded that they believed the Library should guarantee them access to all the books on their reading lists. Whilst the Library at The University of Manchester tends to score very well each year in the National Student Survey, analysis of the open comments have shown that a high percentage of negative remarks about the Library have related to the lack of available core and essential texts

A three-year collaborative Library-wide project (Books Right Here Right Now), involving extensive research and consultation with academic colleagues and students, resulted in The University of Manchester Library reading list strategy. The strategy seeks to ensure that Library provision of reading list material is more effective and consistent. The successful implementation of a new service to deliver on this strategy has required determination, some lateral thinking and a truly collaborative approach.

Keywords

Reading lists; e-textbooks; reading list software; purchasing policy; reading list strategy; collaboration; innovation

A new reading lists service

In May 2019 The University of Manchester Library introduced a new reading lists service to provide our academic staff and students with access to all their reading list items whilst also supporting them in managing and accessing their reading lists online via our reading list software, 'Reading Lists Online' (Ex Libris' Leganto). It is the result of a complete service overhaul which aims to make life easier for teaching staff and improve the student experience at Manchester. It puts into practice the Library's reading list strategy, developed through engagement and partnership with University staff and students during the Library's three-year strategy project, Books Right Here Right Now (BRHRN).

The University of Manchester Library launched the BRHRN project to provide a strategic solution to issues identified with the provision of reading list materials to our students. The project sought to improve the student experience at Manchester by investigating student reading behaviour and implementing innovative models for providing textbooks via the Library. In order to achieve this, the Library recognized that it needed to become more adaptable and adopt radical new ways of facilitating access to material.[1]

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'a strategic solution to issues identified with the provision of reading list materials to our students'

On a practical level, the project set about scoping an innovative approach to e-textbook provision via a series of e-book pilots and carried out a review of reading list and acquisitions processes with a view to improving the provision of teaching material.

Launching a reading lists service with a dedicated reading lists team allows us to integrate reading list management with resource acquisition and to streamline access for our students. It combines several existing Library services to simplify and streamline processes for teaching staff, including our previous reading list system, Link2Lists (Talis Aspire) and all existing methods of requesting reading list items. The service enables teaching staff to manage their reading lists and request new teaching resources from a single online location. In turn, this allows the Library to deliver teaching resources in the most efficient and effective way available in line with its new purchasing policy. Students will benefit from enhanced resource provision and increased availability across all course units, as well as an improved experience when accessing their reading.

> 'Library to deliver teaching resources in the most efficient and effective way'

Background

In 2010/11 The University of Manchester Library was one of the first libraries to adopt the Talis Aspire reading list software. Despite initial high hopes for this, we only ever achieved a very minimal uptake of the software across campus. However, the issues and setbacks we faced during our attempts to roll out the reading list system, whilst frustrating, provided a plethora of lessons learned and prepared us well to address outstanding service issues, including the following.

- ***Consolidate the management of reading lists within one team***
  A radical restructure of the Library's Research and Learning Support department in 2011 resulted in the discontinuation of faculty teams and subject librarians. This in turn led to reading lists being managed across three different teams in different departments and locations.

- ***Have a strategy with senior support***
  Lack of a reading list strategy was identified as a key error. This created confusion, with some lists being undertaken by academics, some by administrators and some by the Library, with the majority of lists not being put on the system at all! Without a clear mandate or senior support, we ended up with low academic buy-in and awareness.

- ***Allow time for technical testing and University approval processes***
  Integration with university systems is vital to the effective implementation of a reading list system. In an institution the size of Manchester, the process of gaining approval and technical resource to test new software integrations requires a long lead-in time, particularly when you are competing with other University priorities.

> 'lack of strategy, mandate or clear direction left many of our academic and library staff frustrated with the system'

The situation was far from ideal and the lack of strategy, mandate or clear direction left many of our academic and library staff frustrated with the system. Staff faced multiple routes for ordering and, with no real drivers to the contrary, were left wondering if there was any point in having a reading list system at all.

Having already attempted a change in service, it was clearly recognized that if we wanted to introduce radical change to our service, we only had one more chance to get it right.

Comprehensive market research: gaining buy-in

As a result of lessons learned, we were clear from the outset of the project that any recommendations should be evidence driven. This did, however, mean accepting it would not be a quick fix.

Student reading behaviour

Findings from two significant pieces of market research undertaken by the Library (Know Your Customer and iLibrary), our e-textbook pilots' feedback and the National Student Survey (NSS) open comments were evaluated to explore student reading behaviour and preferences, and the factors influencing these preferences.

The key findings demonstrate that whilst many students state a preference for print books, further analysis reveals in reality that:

- convenience and access far outweigh this preference. In other words, getting access to their core texts (in any format) is far more important to them than the ways in which they read them

- equality of access is important, and students view e-books as a way of addressing the problem of the Library not having enough copies of books on their reading lists.

Students often express frustration at the multitude of systems they are required to use to access content. In regard to reading lists, there is a desire to integrate the lists into the virtual learning environment (VLE) in order to provide a seamless route from the lists to the Library resources.

'student awareness about the Library's reading list system was low'

The results also showed that the provision of up-to-date reading lists was important to our students but that there were huge variances in the provision of electronic reading lists across campus.

Overall, student awareness about the Library's reading list system was low, and students who were aware of the system reported that not all reading lists for all courses and modules were available and that it would be better to have a 'fully integrated and seamless' interface between the Library and Blackboard.

From the evidence gathered, we felt that we had a really good understanding of what our students wanted: convenient and seamless access to items on their reading lists.

However, we were not as clear on what our academic teaching staff thought or how they approach compiling reading lists and ensuring the availability of items in the Library.

'students wanted: convenient and seamless access to items on their reading lists'

Consultation with academic staff on recommended reading

We consulted with academic staff to understand workflows around reading lists and book ordering for teaching, to establish staff requirements for a reading list system and gauge opinion on the implementation of a set of standard terms for describing reading list material.

Our Academic Engagement team carried out 33 informal interviews with academic staff, forming the basis of a University-wide survey to consolidate the findings on a larger scale. The survey received 315 responses from across all faculties, with the majority from the humanities.

The main findings were that:

- 55% of reading lists are updated once a year

- 42% of respondents order books for teaching throughout the year, with the most common months for ordering being July, August, September and January

- 54% of respondents thought that Library books were not always available in the right quantities

- the most frequently used methods for disseminating reading lists were via the VLE (77%), with almost as many providing students with hard copies (22%) as using the Library's reading list system, Link2Lists (24%)

- there is a wide range of terms used to describe items that students *have* to read and most respondents used more than one term. Academics in humanities are more likely to use the terms 'required reading', 'set texts' or 'core reading', whereas academics in life sciences and medical and human sciences were more likely to use 'directed reading'

- 62% of respondents agreed that a standardized set of terms would be something they would be willing to adopt (with a further 23% being neutral)

- when asked about the Library's Link2Lists system, 30% had not heard of it and a further 33% had heard of it but not used it

- when asked about what features of a reading list system they would find the most useful, the most common features mentioned were being able to order books and digitized chapters from the reading list system, and usage analytics

- when respondents were also asked what they thought would improve the Library's current ordering systems, the main themes were automatic book ordering, more e-books and a notification system.

'focusing on reducing the administrative burden of our academic colleagues'

In order to achieve buy-in at the point of implementing a new service, we were able to use these identified perceptions, in particular focusing on reducing the administrative burden of our academic colleagues.

We recognized we had a lot to do to improve our reading list system provision. Whilst feedback demonstrated very low awareness and take up, it also showed us where we would need to focus:

- improved functionality; most importantly, integrating our acquisitions process into the reading list system

- better support and training materials

- more engagement and marketing

- senior buy-in through a fully developed reading list strategy.

The outcome of our market research and consultation with students and teaching staff informed the development of our new Library policy for the purchase of reading list books and Library reading list strategy for the University. They also contributed in no small way to the development of our communications to academic staff, which have played a key role in gaining support from the academic community.

'we only had one more chance to get this right'

It's been a long time coming...

We established that we needed comprehensive evidence, a fully integrated system and a consolidated team to implement the new service effectively, that we only had one more chance to get this right, and that it would therefore take time to ensure this was done properly.

Following the final recommendations of BRHRN in Dec 2017, an implementation project was launched to bring together a new consolidated reading lists team within our then Content, Collections and Discovery division.

'Collaboration has been key to finding and establishing real change'

Developing the University of Manchester Library reading list strategy and policy for the purchase of reading list books

Collaboration has been key to finding and establishing real change here at The University of Manchester Library. Having already taken a collaborative and consultative approach with our academic staff and students to establish service needs, we involved staff from across

multiple Library divisions in its implementation. This cross-Library project team brought valuable insight and experience which has been vital in finding a practical, yet customer focused and innovative solution to service provision.

We agreed early on that when working on both the purchasing policy and our reading list strategy, we would take a challenging, questioning approach and ensure that all perspectives were considered. We accepted the process could be uncomfortable at times and agreed we would be candid without being personal and look to identify any of our own resistances to change early on.

The University of Manchester Library reading list strategy

We developed a reading list strategy to document and agree the shared responsibility for the provision of reading lists and reading list resources across campus. It stands as a framework on which to develop a practical solution and service that truly provides our students with an improved experience. The strategy seeks to ensure that this is an achievable goal and to manage and satisfy students' expectations with regards to accessing Library resources. It also introduces our new 'Library purchasing policy for reading lists books' and outlines how we are seeking to support the University's 'Policy on Inclusive Teaching and Learning Materials' and its 'Policy on additional costs incurred by students on undergraduate and postgraduate taught programmes' which both aim to deliver equality of access to learning resources.

'concerns that online reading lists are "spoon-feeding" our students'

We had received feedback from pockets of the University of concerns that online reading lists are 'spoon-feeding' our students. In response to this, we also wanted the strategy to acknowledge the need for students to develop research skills in order to benefit from the broader set of resources available to them beyond the confines of a reading list.

The Reading Strategy has three core goals, which are each supported by a series of enabling actions, to:

- ensure that library provision of reading list resources meets the teaching and learning needs of our students and academic colleagues

- improve the student experience with regards to accessing and engaging with content on their reading lists

- ensure students make the best use of library resources and equip them with the capacity to find and evaluate information.

The University of Manchester Library policy for the purchase of reading list books

Our purchasing policy was developed to ensure we could deliver fully on the first goal of the strategy:

- to make informed decisions on the appropriate levels and format of resources

- to introduce the one-to-one e-textbook purchasing and delivery model as a solution for the provision of access to 'core' texts for large and distance-learning cohorts.

'a bolder approach, bringing new ideas and challenging assumptions, legacy thinking and conservative behaviour'

To ensure this new policy for the purchase of reading list books would work for all stakeholders (students, academics and the Library), we took a collaborative approach from the outset, with Teaching and Learning, Academic Engagement and Purchasing colleagues working together. This encouraged a bolder approach, bringing new ideas and challenging assumptions, legacy thinking and conservative behaviour.

The output is a policy that requires our academic staff to tag each item on a reading list with an importance setting, allowing us to make informed decisions on resource provision. The set of terms agreed was established through our customer consultation and research, and we have taken an e-first approach. Each category has its own purchasing method to ensure appropriate access whilst maintaining cost effectiveness, including the provision of 'core' texts via our e-textbook programme, use of our print 'high demand' loan status and demand-driven access for all 'further' reading.

The e-textbook programme for the provision of core texts launched in September 2018 and, during its first academic year, over 8,600 University of Manchester students benefited from seamless online access to their core reading. The Library's offer now provides almost 11,000 students on 184 modules, across mainly first-year undergraduate large cohorts and distance learning courses, with a personal, downloadable copy of their core textbooks in e-textbook format. The programme is strategically targeted and in addition to increasing student satisfaction through direct support for the University policy on additional costs with the provision of equality of access to core reading, we are aiming to support work on social inclusion and differential attainment, as well as enhancing the University's digital-, distance- and mobile-learning agenda.[2]

> 'aiming to support work on social inclusion and differential attainment'

Both the strategy and purchasing policy were then taken for discussion and review with the University's Teaching and Learning Group and, after some minor changes were negotiated, the strategy was approved in April 2018. This has given us the support and senior buy-in that we had previously lacked.

Procurement and system implementation

A fundamental part of implementing our new reading lists service to deliver on our reading list strategy has been the use of online reading list software. We had not reviewed our reading list software for almost nine years and now had very clear up-to-date requirements through our consultation with staff and students, namely the need for:

- a fully integrated and seamless interface between the VLE and reading list content/the Library for both staff and students

- the ability to order books and digitized chapters from within the reading list system

- usage analytics.

We needed to fully realize these along with other more detailed user requirements that had been identified, whilst also gaining internal efficiencies through streamlined digital workflows. Therefore, in the summer of 2018, the Library undertook a procurement exercise for reading list software to establish the true 'one-stop shop' for reading lists to which we aspired. Our main focus was an improved user interface, full integration with our Library Management System (LMS) and the CLA's (Copyright Licensing Agency) Digital Content Store, and to fully incorporate all forms of content ordering and delivery into the system. As a result of a thorough procurement exercise, we chose to move over to Ex Libris' Leganto, which offered us true integration with our acquisitions and digitization processes, as well as delivering on all other integration and user interface requirements.

> 'true integration with our acquisitions and digitization processes'

Leganto offers us the option to tailor and adapt the system and its interface to suit our own very specific institutional needs. It allows our academic staff to add items to a reading list directly from our library discovery interface, 'Library Search' (Ex Libris' Primo), as well as from other external sources. They can then tag those items with our purchasing policy importance tags, automatically triggering purchase requests. Each triggered request is triaged via a set of purchasing rules, designed to check our current holdings against our purchasing policy and flag only those which need attention from the team. We are currently exploring how we might be able to make better use of this functionality to triage more

and more complex resource sufficiency checks to gain even greater efficiencies. The way in which importance tags could be implemented within the system was key to satisfying demands of certain groups of academic colleagues which had been raised at sign-off of the reading list strategy; namely that tags would be only visible to academic and Library staff for the purpose of informed purchasing. A number of staff were concerned that tagging items for students as 'essential' or 'recommended' would determine what students read in a potentially negative way. We therefore have a system that allows private tagging for purchasing purposes only and an option for academic staff to add their own tags for students if they so wish.

The implementation of Leganto was project managed by a member of our Digital Technologies and Services team, fully embracing and extending our cross-team approach by spending one day a week in the office with the reading lists team. This resulted in time saving, better mutual understanding of all aspects of the system and service implementation, as well as an increase in shared responsibility.

Delivering a fully integrated reading list service

In May 2019 the Library introduced our new reading list service and the Reading Lists Online system to our academic staff, with a comprehensive marketing campaign. Our phased campaign was framed by the principles of the reading list strategy, with focus on the benefits and practical direct action needed by academic staff. The campaign used direct messaging to academic staff, faculty and school-level communications and the use of academic advocates, as well as University-wide announcements and social media. We went live to all students from 1 September 2019 within the VLE. This service is now managed by a single team within the Collection Strategies Directorate.

As touched on earlier, the team has developed digitally integrated workflows for the management of all elements of ordering and delivery of reading list items. This includes book purchasing and digitization, delivering on all aspects of the purchasing policy (including e-textbooks for core texts), thus implementing our reading list strategy in practical terms.

As part of the service launch, the Reading Lists team, together with additional temporary resource, made the offer to add new lists into the system on behalf of our staff prior to teaching in September. (Lists which had previously been in Talis Aspire were migrated over to the new system prior to launch.) Feedback from our academic colleagues has so far in the main been positive, with feedback from one school committee meeting stating that 'Reading Lists Online looks very simple to use. We're pleased to be able to do all book ordering and digitization requests in one place and like the fact that it is digital, as e-books make accessing material much easier for students'.

Between launching the service to academic staff in May and going live to our students in September:

- 907 new lists have been created, 384 by academic staff and 523 by the Reading Lists team

- almost 400 academic staff have actively engaged with the system to edit, add their own lists and tag citations

- we have purchased an additional 630 unique items, over half of which have been delivered as e-books

- 80% of all digitisation requests for the start of term were received via the reading list system, highlighting a real shift towards the new process

- there have been 2,671 views of our online support and training resources and we have taken 26 one-to-one bookings.

Ultimately, in the five months since service launch, we have more than trebled our reading list content and subsequently reviewed the sufficiency of each list's resource provision against our purchasing policy, taking a huge step towards achieving our goals of seamless equality of access for our students.

We hope to see a gradual and continued increase in uptake from across the University over the next few years and will be monitoring areas of low engagement from academic departments to review what further support or encouragement might be needed. We will also start to monitor and review student engagement and use of the system, as well as seeking further integration with central University workflows and systems, in order to establish Reading Lists Online as the single point of truth for all reading lists at the University.

'in the five months since service launch, we have more than trebled our reading list content'

Conclusion

As outlined, there have been many contributing factors to both the BRHRN project and the following service overhaul and relaunch that have led to the successful implementation of real change, with a sustainable and customer-focused solution.

The amount of time and resource devoted to achieving such a transformation should not be underestimated, and we are not there yet. We recognize that dedicated support, a willingness for compromise in places and further service development to meet specific school or departmental needs will be key to reaching institution-wide engagement.

However, it is largely through our invested, extensively researched and collaborative approach that we hope to bring about the ambitious and tangible benefits to both our academic staff and students that we set out to achieve.

References

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