

Represent: building diverse library collections in collaboration with library users

The 'Read at Leicester' leisure reading collection was developed to encourage sustained reading for leisure amongst University of Leicester students. A key challenge in building this collection was not having any funds to develop it. It was important that the collection was representative of the diverse user population. In order to start putting the collection together, books already held in the library that were not on subject reading lists were identified. Throughout this process it became evident that, in order to achieve true representation within the collection, the library would need to work in collaboration with library users to develop it. A fund of £1,000 was secured to launch a campaign to purchase diverse books and build the collection. In October 2019, the Represent campaign was launched as a campaign through which library users could recommend titles from under-represented voices for the library to purchase. The Represent campaign has been live since October 2019 and, as of November 2020, a total of 199 requests have been received.

Keywords

leisure reading; diversity; representation; collection building

Background

The 'Read at Leicester' campaign was launched in 2016 at the University of Leicester as part of a university-wide initiative to encourage sustained reading for leisure amongst students and to help foster a sense of community for new students. Over the first three academic years of this campaign, the University Library gifted free copies of selected titles to all new students. Each academic year, the selected titles were used to facilitate discussions with students around key themes and issues raised within the texts.

Over the 2018/19 academic year, *The Good Immigrant*, edited by Nikesh Shukla, was the chosen title gifted to students. *The Good Immigrant* is a collection of short essays about race and identity in Britain. Over the course of the academic year, the book made a huge impact and acted as a means through which the library could facilitate difficult conversations amongst staff and students about race and racism in Britain. In January 2019, this culminated in a panel discussion at the University with three writers who had contributed essays to *The Good Immigrant*, where issues such as race, tokenism and representation were discussed.

Leisure reading collection

As a result of the success of the Read at Leicester campaign, staff and students began to ask the library to signpost them to other books available in the library to read for leisure. While there is a wide selection of titles available within the library, books are situated across four floors of the building making it difficult for students to browse for books. To continue encouraging reading for leisure, beyond the title being gifted to students, the idea of building a leisure reading collection began to be conceptualized, where users could be signposted to one location in the library to browse and borrow books from a range of titles.



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2 The key challenge at the outset of this project was not having any funds to develop a new leisure reading collection. In order to start putting the collection together, books already held in the library that were not on subject reading lists were identified and brought together into one location on the ground floor of the library, under the banner of the Read at Leicester collection. Book titles were identified for the collection by consulting online lists such as book prize lists. From these, any titles held by the library were checked to ensure they were not on subject reading lists before being relocated to the ground floor.

The success of using *The Good Immigrant* had demonstrated how important it was to have a representative selection of books in the collection to give the under-represented identities in the student body a legitimate space within the collection. It was important that representation was a core part of the building of this collection and not just an add-on. The library collections already held a number of titles purchased for events such as Black History Month and LGBTQ+ History Month, as well as titles from the Jhalak¹ prize longlist, an annual book prize for BAME writers. As a result, a diverse selection of titles could be identified for the new leisure reading collection. Yet these titles still did not ensure the collection would be representative of the range of diversity in the student population. There were several areas in which the collection lacked, such as books about disabilities and learning difficulties. However, without any funds, new books could not be purchased to address these gaps.

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A case was put together to demonstrate the impact of *The Good Immigrant* on the student experience, using feedback that was collected from the panel discussion event. This evidence was tied to the Educational Excellence programme,² a university-wide programme implemented to improve the student experience. The Educational Excellence programme focused on five strands, one of which was inclusivity. A case was put forward to the Development and Alumni Relations Office about the importance of having a representative collection of books in order to make it inclusive of all students, in a bid to secure funds to purchase new book titles from under-represented voices. Through this, £500 was secured and used to purchase 46 new titles to help address gaps in the collection. With these new titles, the Read at Leicester leisure reading collection was launched in September 2019 with a total of 114 books. The collection proved to be extremely popular on launch, and by November 2019, an additional 146 titles from the main collection were added to the leisure reading collection to meet demand.

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Represent

Throughout this process, it became evident that to achieve true representation within the collection, the library would need to work in collaboration with library users. Campaigns such as the 'Broaden my Bookshelf'³ campaign at the University of Huddersfield and the 'Liberate our Library'⁴ campaign at Goldsmiths University had already proved to work successfully in engaging students to build and develop diverse library collections.

A project proposal was presented to the library's Associate Director of Resources to try and secure additional funding for the 2019/20 academic year. The proposal outlined the Represent campaign: a campaign through which library users could recommend titles from under-represented voices for the library to purchase and add to the leisure reading collection. Using the term 'under-represented' would allow for the campaign to take an intersectional approach by ensuring users did not have to box their identities into predefined categories. This broad approach would also allow for library users to recommend titles about issues that the library may not have thought to include. The project was approved and granted £1,000 with which to start the Represent campaign. In October 2019, the Represent campaign was launched. An online form and printed postcards were created so that students could recommend book titles for purchasing.

'Using the term "under-represented" would allow for the campaign to take an intersectional approach'

3 By having a broad approach, the library received recommendations from students to purchase books about topics such as racism, and sexual and gender identity, as well as sex positivity, body image and ethical global climate issues. These were all issues that were being discussed more widely on campus through events such as 'Go Green Week'⁵ or the #metoocampus⁶ campaign, making it important to include these titles within the collection in order to contribute to these conversations.

The campaign has been praised by students and staff at the University:

'I think it's great to have those voices as part of the welcome to the library and also a reminder that education takes lots of forms – reading for pleasure and outside the syllabus or subject area is absolutely what we should be encouraging students to do, and hopefully through this they'll give us back some of their own favourites too.'
– Academic staff from the School of Arts, University of Leicester.

'I'm loving #ReadatLeicester for not just encouraging leisure reading but dedicating time & space to it. The revamped Reading Zone, packed with non-academic books, makes the library an excellent blend of libraries that inspired me as a child & support me in my studies as an adult.' – PhD student in the Victorian Centre, University of Leicester.

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Marketing and promotion

As there was no additional funding for the marketing and promotion of this campaign, it relied entirely on word of mouth. As part of the Academic Liaison team, my colleagues and I were able to send out messages to other departments using our contacts. Social media was utilized and details of the campaign, as well as new books that were being purchased, were promoted on the library Twitter page and the University staff Yammer page.

Developing links with key student groups was essential to the success of this campaign. Leicester Students Union recruits students who volunteer as Equality and Liberation Champions (ELCs) across all subject areas. Details of the campaign were shared with them and they then passed this information on to students in their departments. Some students also volunteer as Library Champions each academic year. They include students from any level of study across different subject areas. Part of their role has been to promote the Represent campaign to their peers. Champions shared details through lecture shout-outs, e-mails to students in their departments and direct messages on social media group chats, amongst other word of mouth methods.

'Developing links with key student groups was essential to the success of this campaign'

E-mails containing information about the Represent campaign and a link to the web form were sent out to all active student societies during the first term of the 2019/20 academic year. Interested societies shared details of the campaign with their members through which awareness of the campaign increased. A number of student societies actively promoted the campaign throughout the academic year. For example, the English Society, the Book Club Society and the Victorian Society were active in promoting this campaign through their social media channels. Following on from this, some student societies sent through collective suggestions such as the Women in STEM Society, who suggested titles related to gender and race in science, as well as the Book Club Society, who crowdsourced book titles for Black History Month and LGBTQ+ History Month. As a result of their work on the campaign, the Book Club Society were presented the Student Group of the Year award in May 2020.

Requests through Represent

The Represent campaign has been live since October 2019 and as of November 2020, a total of 199 requests have been received. The web form has been the most successful method by which requests have been received (see Figure 1). The link to the web form was shared with

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4 departments and student groups by e-mail and on social media, which is why it has attracted more use. The postcards were put with the leisure reading collection to attract requests from users borrowing titles from the collection. Only 10% of requests were made using this method.

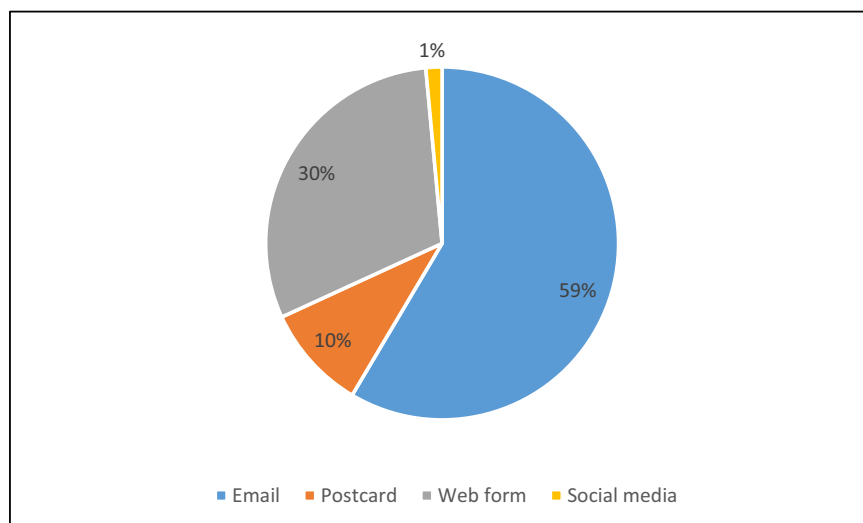


Figure 1. Method of request

While the majority of requests came from students and staff at the University of Leicester, two requests were received from people who were external to the University and had become aware of the campaign through social media (see Figure 2). Both requesters had links to Leicester, one external request came from a local writer and another from a local charity, Hope for Cancer, who had published a book to raise money for their charity. Five requests were submitted anonymously. These requests were for titles about body image, sexual harassment and sexual assault. One of the reasons these may have come through anonymously could be because of the sensitive nature of the issues being discussed in the books.

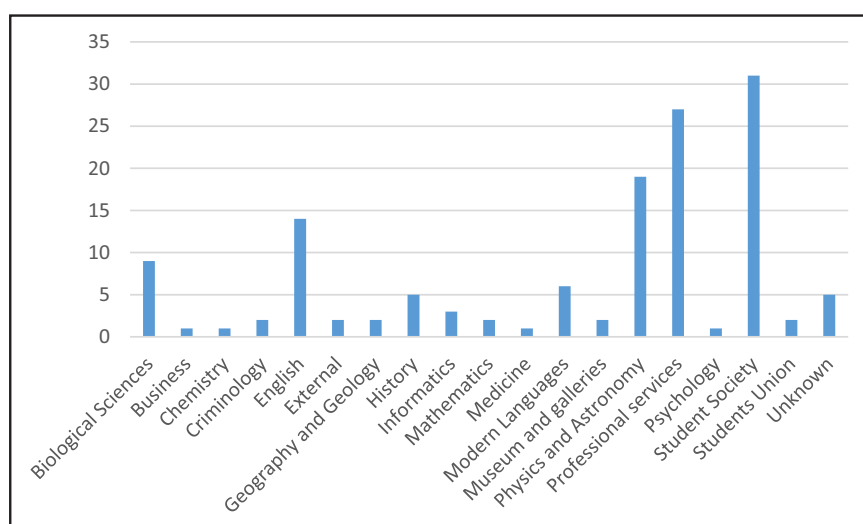


Figure 2. Number of requests by department

Of the 199 requests, 132 were titles not held by the library and were purchased using the Represent fund (see Figure 3). Of the remaining requests, 64 titles were already held in the library collections. These requests were moved down to the Read at Leicester collection. Out of all the requests received, only three have not been fulfilled. Two titles have been out of print and one title was not available as a translation in English from Arabic.



Figure 3. Requests from Represent campaign

Usage of collection

As of November 2020, there are 347 titles in the collection, with requests from users still being received. There have been 480 loans since the Read at Leicester collection was launched and 261 titles from the collection have been borrowed at least once. The most borrowed title has been loaned six times and the top ten borrowed titles have all come through the Represent campaign (see Figure 4).

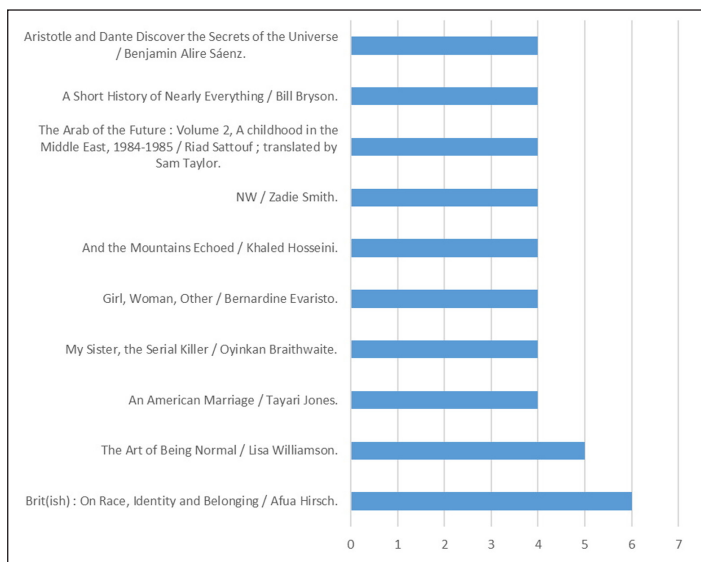


Figure 4. Top ten loaned titles

The collection has been successful in attracting a range of users at all levels across the University, demonstrating that it is of interest across all borrowing groups (see Figure 5). The largest borrowing group has been undergraduate students, which is reflective of the size of the borrowing group.

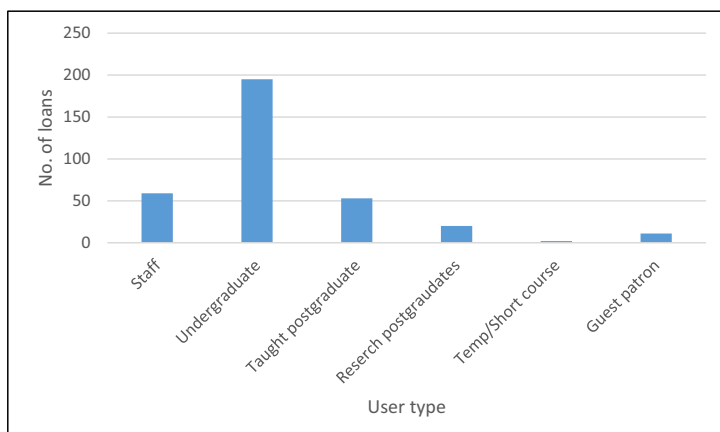


Figure 5. Number of loans by user type

Feedback survey

In February 2020, a survey was shared with students and staff across the University to collect feedback about the impact of the Read at Leicester leisure reading collection and the Represent campaign. The survey received 93 responses from students and staff, with most responses coming from undergraduate (UG) students, which is reflective of the user group with the highest use of the collection (see Figure 6).

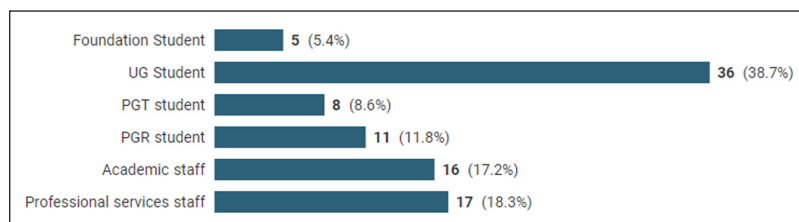


Figure 6. Number of responses to survey by user group

Responses

90% of respondents replied that they liked to read for leisure. However, only 45% of respondents were aware of the Read at Leicester leisure reading collection, indicating that more work needs to be done to promote the collection to interested users. Only 35% of respondents were aware of the Represent campaign, demonstrating that there is still a low level of awareness on campus about this campaign despite the volume of requests received through it. This is currently being addressed in the library space by creating regular displays using titles from the collection to fit in with events taking place on campus, such as Black History Month.

Raising awareness of this collection could also have a positive impact on the usage of other titles within the main collection. Two respondents in the survey noted that the collection had changed the way they used the library:

'...it has encouraged me to use the Reading Zone, but also the shelves all around the library to look for interesting things to read. It has changed the way I view the library, use the library and makes the library a place of enjoyment and relaxation.'

'I have had to come in to return books and as a result browse and take more out. Didn't used to use the library in this way before.'

The utilization of social media continues to promote titles from the collection and a new Instagram account has been set up to facilitate more online promotion. Library Champions from the 2020/21 cohort are involved in recommending books on the Instagram page. Library Champions are also creating termly newsletters and regular blog posts which are shared with their departments to promote the campaign and book recommendations.

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Facilitating conversations

One of the aims of the Represent campaign going forward is to start more discussions around the issues and topics covered by books purchased through the Represent campaign. As a way to facilitate conversation about representation, a zine-making workshop was held in February 2020 in collaboration with the Book Club Society. The purpose of the workshop was to capture the thoughts and feelings of students around the topic of representation. It was attended by four students who were all from different year groups and subject areas. These students created their own zines through which they discussed feelings of being 'othered', body image representation in mainstream media and the importance of seeing yourself as the hero.

'to start more discussions around the issues and topics covered by books purchased through the Represent campaign'

7 In light of the Covid-19 pandemic, Library Champions have been looking at keeping the conversation going by developing online discussion forums. Launching in 2021, it will help facilitate conversations about issues that they feel are really important. These forums will be hosted on a Blackboard module that will be open to University staff and students and will be facilitated by Library Champions and library staff.

Library Champions have also widened the scope of this campaign to include looking into diversity within subject readings and accessibility issues around accessing books. As a result, Library Champions are currently working on projects to gather diverse information resources for their subject areas and creating accessibility guidance aimed at students.

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Future plans

Going forward, a core aim for this campaign is to move beyond simply purchasing diverse books for the library collections to creating more engagement opportunities concerning topics and issues raised by the titles purchased, as well as the topic of representation more generally. Looking ahead, additional work needs to be done in facilitating conversations more widely throughout the University to bring issues raised through the collection's book to the forefront. There is also a lot of scope to extend the campaign to focus on subject-specific readings and feeding into the decolonization of the curriculum. Students will continue to be key collaborators for the campaign and will actively inform the direction it takes.

Abbreviations and Acronyms

A list of the abbreviations and acronyms used in this and other *Insights* articles can be accessed here – click on the URL below and then select the 'full list of industry A&As' link: <http://www.uksg.org/publications#aa>.

Competing interests

The author has declared no competing interests.

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