Northumbria Research Link

Publishers, librarians, academics and students are likely to benefit from innovative work going on at the University of Huddersfield linking use of library resources with final degree result. *Gazette* talks to **Deborah Goodall**, **Dave Pattern** and **Graham Stone** at the university library about the research and why they are now keen to benchmark the data with other universities.

Making resources work harder

What prompted this research?

Graham Stone: Over the last 10 years we have seen a huge rise in the use of e-resources. However, 'problems with access' rank alongside 'lack of books' as the perennial favourites in student feedback surveys. We also have to make our resources work harder than ever in the current financial climate. Anecdotally, we're aware that there are a significant number of users who do not use e-resources. All of our surveys have concentrated on users: we have never examined our non-users' views, until now. These issues make the low/non-use of (e) resources of particular interest to me.

Dave Pattern: We've had a project running for a few years now investigating areas of non- and low usage of library services and resources – specifically e-resource logins, item loans and visits to the library – which has been extremely useful for identifying cohorts of students who underuse our resources. We began wondering if that usage was in any way related to their final grades.

Deborah Goodall: The library's work on low/non-use contributes towards maximising the use of resources, and informing university-wide goals, one of which is that two-thirds of students achieve first and upper second class degrees by 2012-13.

Describe the research.

DP: We had already collated the usage data, so we just needed to extract details of final grades. An initial check of the data indicated that there were correlations. We began looking for further correlations down to the level of individual courses of study. Specifically, we examined the final three years' worth of usage by the 2007-8 and 2008-9 graduates. We'll be examining the 2009-10 data shortly.

What were the main results?

DP: When we looked at library usage by all graduates, broken down by grade, we saw a striking correlation between the final grade and both book loans and e-resource usage. Although there was no overall correlation with the number of visits to the library, we did see correlations for certain courses.

DP: The graph shows the average usage by the last two years of graduates. On average, those who gained a first-class honours degree borrowed twice as many items and logged into MetaLib (to access e-resources) over three times as much as those who achieved a third-class degree. Also, those who gained a first seemed to have a slightly higher ratio of e-resource usage to item loans than the other grades.

How are you going to use the results now?

DG: There are quantifiable differences in the resources used by high and low achievers. Our interest now is in unpacking some of these differences between various types of student and identifying interventions that can benefit all students. Do high achievers choose 'better' resources, or are they 'better' at

choosing resources? Is non-use a resourcing issue or an academic/information skills issue? Dissemination of the results to academic staff has raised all sorts of issues regarding student engagement with formal library provision. Interestingly, the uniting factor for all students, regardless of attainment, was visits to the library. We will be using focus groups to discover why students visit the library and what they do there.

We are interested in what books they are reading and how they discover what they want to read. We will explore the different ways in which students studying different courses make use of books for study. At institutional level, we know that the library only receives a small proportion of reading lists. Given that, each year, approximately one third of library stock circulates while two-thirds stays on the shelf, we need to examine how well library stock maps on to prescribed undergraduate academic requirements. At course level, academics provide reading lists, the library provides a catalogue, but there are anecdotal reasons to suggest that these are not always the main sources of direction

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for students. We overhear the strength of personal recommendations and we see the use of Google and Amazon to identify useful titles. By supporting our academic colleagues in producing course packs and our students in using other local higher education and NHS libraries, are we bypassing university library provision? An analysis of the most heavily borrowed books by course may quantify the impression that outside influences abound.

We need to find out about the skills and experiences that students bring with them to university. For example, browsing is common in public libraries yet we do not cater for this in academic libraries. The emphasis on the reading list and the formal presentation of stock could be alienating potential users. I believe if students had more confidence in their book selection abilities we would see better use of our library stock and an increase in student satisfaction.

Do the results have implications for future purchasing?

DG: Lecturers, librarians, suppliers and students have a shared interest in the reading list, and the proposed work will be useful for colleagues within and outside the university. A preference for print or electronic provision appears to be evident for some courses. Understanding exactly how content is sourced by students and how students select relevant items, whether from a list of results in a database
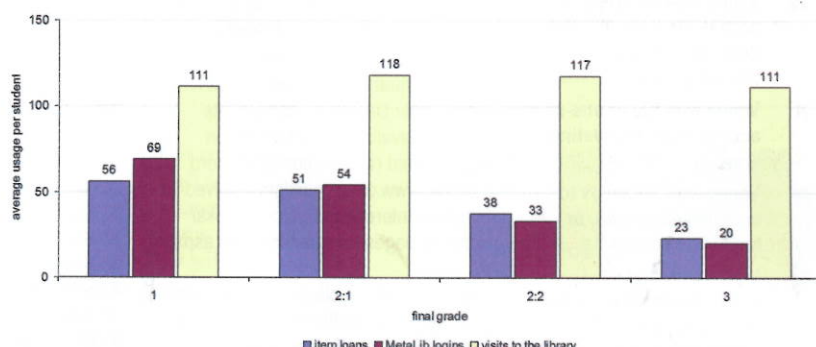
Average usage of library resources by the last two years of graduates at Huddersfield University

or from a shelf of books in the library, may inform future decisions about provision, presentation and promotion of resources.

GS: From an e-resources point of view, it is interesting to see how this information affects our perceptions of high use. For example, a number of business resources are seen as successful subscriptions in that cost per usage is very low and overall usage when measured against other resources is high. However, when bringing this into context with the comparative low/non-use of resources within all business courses, usage could and indeed should be significantly higher. Further analysis of usage versus impact is needed and this may mean we have to re-evaluate our criteria for renewal/cancellation of resources.

Do the results have implications for information vendors?

GS: Being able to link the use of specific resources to this research would be of particular interest to publishers and information vendors.

GS: Vendors may also want to investigate the 'usability' of their resources in the light of this research. Are users put off by the complexity of some interfaces? Anecdotal evidence from a focus group suggested that some students are pushed towards Google Scholar by their tutors. While the library has a clear role to play in the advocacy of its own subscriptions to encourage higher use, vendors also have a lot to lose.

How are you taking this work forward?

GS: We are keen to benchmark our data with partners in other universities. Then the next step would be to produce a toolkit to enable other universities to exploit their data. We also intend to work with a publisher to see if actual title/article usage can be linked to the data and, if so, what implications this has. Regarding possible renewals/cancellations of e-resources, we will be careful not to make any rash decisions before benchmarking with other institutions and significance testing the data. As the first UK commercial adopter of Summon, the web- scale discovery system from Serials Solutions, we will be analysing the data closely to see if the 'ease of use' reported in the focus groups translates to increased

use of library e-resources from low/non-users.

DP: Through work carried out on our Opac since 2005, we've been able to show the benefits of adding serendipity – we've seen a marked increase in both the range of bookstock being borrowed and the average number of loans per student. With that in mind, I'm interested in seeing what the students who gain a first are doing differently to their colleagues who use the library less and get lower grades. For example, are they borrowing beyond their reading list and are they using more e-resources? If so, can we incorporate that information back into the recommendations that we deliver via services such as the Opac and Summon?

DG: We're selecting case studies for next term and identifying issues relevant to each School. As many of Huddersfield's courses incorporate industry placements this work could give important messages to students, sponsors and employers about the nature of studying for a degree in today's complex higher education environment. Library use is just one factor contributing towards final grade, but this work presents a great opportunity to try and improve the grade of all students.

■ Deborah Goodall is Academic Librarian, Human & Health Sciences; Dave Pattern is Library Systems Manager; and Graham Stone is E-resources Manager, University of Huddersfield.