

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Resource discovery in higher education

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Foreword

Those in academic libraries are well aware of the significant change that the UK higher education sector is undergoing. Over the last few months I've spent a lot of time talking to our customers and the message I'm hearing loud and clear is that the student experience is key.

As with tuition fees students' expectations of their higher education experience are on the rise. This doesn't seem to have gone unnoticed by university and library management teams; it seems that many heads of service have improving the student experience high on their list of priorities and many have objectives to improve their score in the National Student Survey.

As a library management system software provider, it's our role to help you achieve your objectives. Opinions have always been and will continue to be valuable to us, but if we truly want to improve the student experience there is no better way than to speak directly to your customers, your students. In this research project we did just that.

The results of this research project will directly influence our future plans. This is not a singular exercise; instead it's part of an ongoing strategy focusing on the needs of students and puts the user at the centre of the library management suite of solutions.

Finally I'd like offer my thanks to both Bournemouth University and the University of Central Lancashire for allowing us access to their students.

I hope you find this summary of the research useful, and if you would like to discuss any of the findings or your requirements further then please don't hesitate to contact me.

Kind regards

Jon Peart

Associate director, Capita

Research findings

Introduction

Towards the end of 2011 Capita conducted a qualitative research project to better understand academic library user needs, attitudes and behaviour towards resource discovery. While library staff were included in the research, the research went beyond library staff focusing on the needs of the library users, both students and academics.

The research findings provide highly valuable and specific insights, particularly into how the library's systems fit with the teaching and learning needs of the university and its students.

To ensure Capita continues to develop solutions that meet students' needs, the research focused on how students search for resources to support their academic work. With electronic resources (e-resources) playing such a pivotal role in libraries, it is essential that Capita assesses attitudes towards their use within libraries from academic staff and students.

Interviews and focus groups were conducted with staff (library and academic) and students from first years to postgraduates at Bournemouth University and the University of Central Lancashire (UCLan).

Search process

Students' expectations of searching for material when starting university tend to be shaped by Google and this is where many students typically begin. Google provides instant access to information and our research reveals that students give up searching easily, prioritising ease of access over quality of resource and often ending on Wikipedia.

Students say:

"I use Google to find articles and books and then I go to the library to access them"

Academics and library staff support students to use more sophisticated and versatile search techniques. As students progress through their course they require more specialised resources and become much more effective at searching. Finalists and postgraduates tend to search across a wider range of resources than first year students.

When students move away from Google they still expect a specialised search to provide a list of all library resources available to them. They often don't differentiate between the component repositories of resources and will go to the search box that

will return the greatest number of relevant results.

With searches there is a tendency to want instant gratification. As a result, the library search experience needs to be as accessible as possible.

Academics say:

"With the first years, when they come in their search mechanism is Google so we have to move them away from that."

It is clear students want to be able to access a whole range of resources from one place. They are used to this in the electronic world and expect the library to be part of it. At Capita we believe the online resource catalogue should be the gateway to all the library has to offer in all formats. Capita's 'one stop shop' approach enables students to search all of the library resources, from books to resources, archives and specialised databases. The majority of databases available to the student can be indexed and surfaced in the search. The upcoming augmented discovery feature in our online resource catalogue, Prism, will provide a much more enriched search for students, integrating e-journal data and institutional repositories into the catalogue.

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Capita has been using the linked data approach to search for a number of years, which has seen vast improvements in search experience and performance in Prism. The linked data approach to the catalogue allows searches to be deeper and segmented through facet. Facets allow the students to refine searches based on metadata held within a record (author, location, year published etc).

Single sign-on to key institutional systems, such as the virtual learning environment and reading list system, is seen as a huge benefit by students. They only want to remember one set of login details to be able to access all their academic resources. As a result, Capita is working to integrate with systems, such as Shibboleth, to improve the student discovery experience.

Paper vs. electronic

Despite the move towards electronic resources paper remains popular. The research indicates that there is a time and place for both paper and electronic resources.

There is still a desire from students for hard copy resources in academic libraries, as some find hard copy easier to read. However, most students did recognise that the future lies in electronic resources. The observation that e-resources are more widely accessible from remote locations, and increasingly more available online, suggests that the desire for hard copy is on the wane. The ability to search through a body of text electronically provides students with a much more valuable resource.

Students say:

"I like paper so I can print it off and scribble on it."

"You need paper books and electronic books side-by-side."

"Sometimes the e-resource is better as it is hard to find the book in the library."

Academics say:

"Design, Engineering and Computing students are almost paper phobic."

"Tourism students are still basically very happy with hard copy."

Devices

There is still some frustration among students when it comes to accessing electronic resources. Some popular e-books, with a maximum number of users, will lead to some students not being able to read it there and then. Journals will have a 6-month quarantine associated with them, restricting the students' ability to access them.

The course being studied often played a part in whether students prefer hardcopy or electronic resources. Engineering students will often prefer e-resources, whereas tourism students will often turn to paper first, for example.

Students told us that they use a wide variety of devices to access library resources, both from within the library and remotely. The rise in use of mobile technologies (tablets, laptops and smartphones) means the library exists outside of the building in which it is housed. The proliferation of these devices means the library can become an online meeting place for students. Student community collaboration is important in recommending texts and journals to fellow scholars.

Some students suggested that a smartphone app would be useful. It was suggested that this would provide information such as whether a book is currently in the library, when it is due to be returned and map of the library showing where the book could be located, it was even suggested that a Smartphone with GPS (Global Positioning System) could navigate the user to the book. Once a book had been located students' suggested that it should be possible to check the book out, simply by scanning the barcode using a smartphone.

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Capita has begun taking steps to enable students to access library services on a smartphone. Capita's online catalogue has been optimised to enable it to be accessed from any smartphone.

Those accessing on a smartphone or tablet will experience a specifically designed interface that focuses on performing key tasks – such as checking resource availability, and reserving and renewing books – in a format suitable for a mobile device.

With significant interest in mobile devices it is clearly an area that can be developed further.

Students say:

"If I could use a phone with GPS to help me locate books; that would be helpful"

"A phone app to tell me whether something is in"

Student collaboration

With an explosion in the use of social media and online collaboration tools we asked students how this could be applied to libraries. There was general enthusiasm for developing solutions in this area and many saw the online bookstore, Amazon.com, as an example.

Students and academics saw the ability to rate and review resources as a useful feature.

Staff suggested that being able to flag resources as favourites, critique items for usefulness and relevance, and make recommendations for additional resources would be useful. The functionality required was likened to that available on Amazon.

Students also referred to Amazon.com suggesting a similar feature to Amazon's "customers who bought this also bought" feature, "customers who viewed this also viewed".

Students suggested the idea of peer ratings and recommendations that offered the ability for the individual to review a resource or tag it to reflect its particular strengths and weaknesses.

Students say:

"When I've bought books on Amazon, there's a bit that says 'people who bought this also bought ...' - if the university catalogue had something like this, it would be fantastic!"

Capita has already made progress in bringing these social and collaborative tools, to the library catalogue. It is already possible for students to rate resources using the Prism catalogue and we have just added 'quick tags' to the application whereby students can rate material for its usefulness and share this with other users of Prism.

Library staff say:

"Any tool that helps us gather and share data in which texts the students like, and which texts the students find useful... are the sorts of tool we need to be looking at."

Recommendations, reviews and ratings on items will allow students to share information about which resources are useful to them. Prism lets students rate resources using a star rating system. Star ratings allow more useful items to rise up the search rankings and giving the students a more relevant result. The ratings are also shared between institutions to give the best resources even more prominence. Students can also set-up RSS feeds that will syndicate content automatically and prompt them when a new resource is catalogued.

Amazon-like 'users who borrowed this resource also borrowed...' recommendations will soon be available in Prism, giving students a much more intuitive search experience.

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Conclusion

The research provided a valuable insight into the day-to-day issues within academic libraries. The feedback from students, librarians and academics has given us a focus for future development. A holistic approach to searching library resources will benefit the student greatly. All new resources from every database within the university should be discoverable from one single search.

Technology plays an important role for the library to allow students to access library information from a range of devices, from on site computers to smartphones and laptops outside the library walls. Social and collaborative tools within the resource discovery interface are becoming increasingly important for students, allowing peer validation of the most useful resources.

Technology advances and e-resources are becoming much more prominent in the library, but it is important to remember that the hard copy book still has a place.

Find out more:

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