

Higher Education Focus: Meeting the Reading List Challenge

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This is a report of the *Meeting the Reading List Challenge* conference held in Loughborough (5th and 6th April 2016). Read the [Storify](#) and check the full conference [programme](#) for the presentation slides.

The conference has been run for six years now, involving developers and librarians from a variety of backgrounds. Although presenters showcased a range of different experiences, several key themes emerged as prevalent, helping delegates to share useful advice about the challenges and opportunities common in many academic libraries.

Several speakers addressed the electronic reading list implementation process, and the challenges such a project presents. Nearly every speaker addressed the issues they had trying to get users engaged with the system. Others touched on the process of integrating their chosen reading list system with other learning resources. Finally, some of the major challenges for the future of electronic reading lists were discussed.

What is an electronic reading list?

Higher education institutions create lists of resources (books and e-books, scholarly research papers, databases, for example) so that students have access to a detailed bibliography for each academic module. Reading list formats vary greatly depending on the nature of the subject, the information literacy levels of students and staff and the availability of resources. In recent years many institutions have adopted dedicated software to make the use of reading lists more streamlined, as well as to make the lists more interactive. (Please refer to the list of software at the end of this article.)

Electronic reading lists are increasingly important in supporting the ongoing shift to digital study habits. They enable students to access the majority of the resources they need from a single source, 24/7, without the need to go physically to the library, or at least not as frequently. Various conference delegates stressed how this is a major selling point of integrated software, because it caters to the increasingly diverse population of long-distance students, part-time students and students with disabilities. Additionally, having so many varied resources accessible in one place facilitates the research work of postgraduates and academic staff alike.

Planning and engagement for electronic reading lists

During the reading list project implementation phase, most libraries sought approval from senior university management using the powerful argument that well-structured electronic reading lists improve the student experience and have impacted positively on student satisfaction surveys. In some cases senior managers took personal ownership of the project and actively promoted the benefits of electronic reading lists to academics.

Other engagement strategies presented during the conference included encouraging collaboration with librarians, academics, other support staff (IT and technology-enhanced learning support, for example), and with students and representatives of the Students' Union. Engagement happened in different ways, ranging from mixed steering groups, to online surveys, to in-depth interviews with academics, to focus groups with students. Some universities trialled their new software on a small scale in a limited number of departments to make sure before the big launch that there were no major bugs, that the system worked on all operative systems, and that it served distance learners well.

A key element of the long-term strategy of many universities has been to make sure the user experience is as intuitive and streamlined as possible. Nearly everybody tried to make the reading list experience simpler for users reducing, for example, the number of steps necessary to get to the desired resource (e.g. direct link to an online article). However, hard copies often still make up a substantial portion of the resources listed even when an institution has access to a great deal of e-resources (e-books and e-journals). In various surveys specifically on reading lists, many students stated that "real" books are still the preferred way to study. Several academic libraries have acted upon this providing clearly marked online information side-panels with the number and location of copies available in the library.

The importance of academic 'buy-in': the virtuous circle

During the conference many identified a major challenge of electronic reading list implementation is the difficulty in keeping academics involved. Early academic buy-in is crucial, to ensure a critical mass of courses are covered by the implementation project, to engage as many students as possible and in turn to encourage students to become advocates for the service and push for consistent, high quality and regularly updated reading lists.

When academics were not engaged or involved on an ongoing basis, the quality of reading lists deteriorated with students seeking out-of-date texts and less likely to discover and utilise electronic resources. The easiest solution would be to dedicate additional library staff to maintain reading lists, but while some libraries allocated resource for this in the project implementation stage, it was not a feasible long-term strategy, even for the largest libraries.

Useful tips that arose from the conference were to invite academics who compiled high quality and well-annotated reading lists to join a reading list steering group and to promote their good work outside the library to set the standard for other lecturers.

Another simple idea was to send reminders with offers of support to owners of lists that had not been updated for a year or longer, or where there were an inadequate number of references.

What does a good reading list look like?

One of the big questions during the conference was whether certain list structures were better than others to facilitate students' reading. Lecturers tend to submit very different reading lists depending on their reading habits, on the module structure, on the target student and on a number of other factors. While it is clear that most reading lists should not be limited to just books, there are a lot of viable options in regard to the variety of resources included, length, added notes and terminology used.

Group activity on day two was focused on this topic, with delegates trying to organise a mixed set of resources into a reading list. Most groups created sections and sub-sections grouping together resources about a particular theme; others reproduced the week-by-week structure of an academic module. Importantly, some lists had notes added in to promote critical thinking, some had tips on how to find the resource, and some explained how those resources would be used in the course (e.g. classroom discussion, reference text). Quite a few were very creative, and there was generally a very different approach from group to group.

This exercise enabled delegates to identify a range of different solutions to support students. While in most cases it will not be possible to have a uniform reading list structure across the university, it is important to initiate a discussion about reading lists with students and academics, to establish at least an agreed set of terms to use when working on reading lists (e.g. core/essential/primary reading).

Objections to electronic reading lists

Group discussions and several presentations brought up common objections to the idea of online reading lists.

The first source of resistance comes from some academics who think that editing reading lists is a clerical job, not something lecturers should do considering their heavy workload. Some argue that their traditional ways have always worked fine, and see no reason to change to a new system. In some organisations the imposition of electronic reading lists is seen as an attempt by administration to standardise everything. Others argue that specialised software can be frustrating and difficult to use, or that it is difficult to remember how to use it because you only update your reading list once a year.

Librarians can easily argue that they require up-to-date reading lists to ensure that they have the right resources in the right format available at the right time. But, in order to counter the academic criticisms, there are a number of key electronic reading list features that could be highlighted to the academic community during the project implementation and service launch phase. Some key features academics find particularly appealing are:

- The ease of updating a reading list with minor changes for the following year

- Live information about resource availability, i.e. connecting reading lists with the online catalogue
- The possibility for students to select reading preferences i.e. 'Currently reading', 'Mark as read' etc.
- Usage statistics, so that a lecturer can see how many students are reading certain articles

Another useful idea is to make it very clear from the beginning that there is no mandate to use reading lists, as this can stir up academic resistance. A better strategy is to get senior management and top academics on board, so that they can advocate the system themselves and encourage uptake amongst the teaching community.

The conference discussed a fundamental critique that impacts on the very nature of electronic reading lists - that they impair the development of critical and information literacy skills among students. Many lecturers believe that they are part of a damaging and patronising mentality that aims at catering for student needs to the point of spoon-feeding, and that this is having a negative effect on the student's ability to do independent academic research. However, it was a widely shared opinion among the attending librarians that complex reading lists actually improve student awareness of questions critical for academic research. A module reading list not only makes studying for a course easier, but it is often the first chance for a student to be exposed to a varied and complex bibliography that has been curated and kept up to date. This can lead to increased awareness of information resources and has positive effects on information literacy levels.

Benefits of electronic reading lists for LIS professionals

Most delegates agreed that a major objective of electronic reading lists from their perspective is to integrate them with other resources so that students can access all of the information they require via the university's Virtual Learning Environment.

Reading list software enables librarians to analyse usage statistics and inform collection development policy and budget management on a local and national level. There is a case for sharing reading lists and associated data with other higher education institutions. This has some exciting possibilities, including a market for used books, insight into the use of open textbooks and even changes to the negotiation process with publishers, with the aim of influencing e-book pricing models.

Another point to reflect on is the idea that academics might want to see what resources colleagues in other institutions are using, although this might cause problems if not all academics are willing to share their reading lists, or if their lists are not copyright-proofed.

Conclusion

The conference was really useful for all librarians, for those who are already working with reading lists and for those who are thinking of implementing a new electronic reading list system. Many libraries have experienced the same opportunities and challenges, and often found similar solutions. I see this as a sign that, as a profession, we are going in the right

direction and I will take this experience as an incentive to network more with other librarians.

Reading list software

The links below provide further information on the software used by the speakers at this year's conference:

[Leganto \(ExLibris\)](#)

[MyReading](#) - University of Huddersfield Reading Lists

[Rebus:list](#)

[Talis aspire](#)

More information on alternative reading lists solutions is available [here](#).