

Book Review: The New Walford Guide to Reference Resources

Ray Lester. London: Facet Publishing; 2005. 848pp. £149.95. ISBN 1-85604-495-5

As the new Computer Science and Physics & Astronomy librarian I awaited my review copy of the new Walford with some trepidation. Do I need such a lengthy (and indeed heavy) tome in this age of the Internet when surely everything is on Google (isn't it?).

The volume itself is split into three broad subject areas (Science, Medicine and Technology). Each area is then subdivided into more discrete areas (including my new subject area of physics and astronomy, with Computer Science being detailed under ICT). Each section has corresponding subject specialists who have been responsible for pulling entries together. Each entry is introduced by the specialist to give some idea of the issues involved in the discipline, including the dominance of specific types of materials. However the different subjects did deal with this in different ways and some standardisation of the purpose of this section (especially as the volume is written with a wider audience in mind) would have been useful. The details of these are then extended in the body of the text.

The book, now in its ninth edition, is better designed for browsing by being based around subjects, rather than using the universal decimal classification system. To aid browsing there is a topic index (which includes some topics too specialised to have a sub-section of their own) and an author/title index, which includes corporate bodies. Cross-referencing is included as appropriate, and duplication is minimal.

I did question why such a volume was needed, but upon working my way through the content, it became very apparent. The range of materials listed strikes a balance between electronic and printed information resources. The materials covered range from basic introductions to the subject (something I needed...) to dictionaries, research centres and associations. There are also some new categories, of discovering print and electronic resources (abstracting and indexing services); digital data, image and text collections (including eprints) and a section on keeping up to date. The resource descriptions were well written and give an indication of coverage, links and usefulness. Although there were some weblogs and newsfeeds listed these were not nearly as comprehensive as I would have liked in some subject areas. I was slightly disappointed that there seemed to be no mention made of some services like the subject-based citation indexes or to Zetoc, both of which have a valuable role in keeping you up to date. Both these services are fairly central to supporting a basic reference enquiry and providing up-to-date information. The list of reference types were not listed in alphabetical order, which was an irritation but only a small one!

The coverage is international in scope and there are many resources drawn from non-English language sites and services. These have the origin and language of the sources listed which is useful. However you have to stumble across these and an index for these non English language materials might have proved a useful addition. There is a list of 50 good websites to try first within the introductory section but there was no indication why these sites were chosen and not others. Was this just an extension of the marketing – and am I just being picky?

I found it a useful volume to help familiarise myself with basic resources in a new subject area and to begin the process of updating a limited reference collection (limited both on budget and space!) and helping me to know that the resources I have chosen are key to these disciplines. As an eInformation Group member I await the electronic version so I can check the holdings of my library directly, to see if we do indeed have many of these useful reference materials.

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