
Does your library need 'More books'?



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quickly apparent that the problem is not the amount of resources the library has, but one of the following:

- 'The library has the book, but I was unable to get hold of it when I wanted to.'
- 'I want a specific title that the library does not stock.'

Both scenarios may ultimately lead to the library needing to acquire stock. In the first scenario, however, there might also be other options, such as advising the user to use the library's reservation system to recall the book – a function that too many students are unaware of or unwilling to use. In some cases, where resources are heavily sought after, the only option is to buy additional copies. Whilst we adopt a proactive approach to taught-course provision via the acquisition of reading lists before the start of the year and we monitor usage retrospectively throughout the year and manage stock accordingly, there is no way of ensuring optimum resource provision without

user testimony. But in order for that feedback from users about resources to be effective it needs to be immediate and *title specific*.

The obvious response from the library to the second scenario is to acquire the book without delay. But at Durham the academic departments are responsible for spending their library allocation, and any purchase would have to be agreed by the departmental library representative. This added stage, often combined with a lack of understanding among students as to how the library

acquires stock, can be enough to dissuade users from getting in touch with the library about items which are not in stock. And hence feedback gathered at the end of term or the academic year may be 'The library didn't have what I need' or 'There are not enough books in the library.'

We decided that the easiest way to address this was in simple terms. We would say to our users 'We haven't got what you need? Tell us what you want and we'll get it – no questions asked.' This became the basis of our 'More books' campaign, first implemented in the academic year 2010–11. Of course, that is a little too simplistic. We did need some limitations and structure, but we were determined to keep it as 'open' as possible. Ground rules we decided on were that:

Do you need **MORE BOOKS?**

Have you ever been frustrated because you couldn't get hold of a book you needed?

MORE BOOKS gives you the opportunity to tell the Library which resources you can't get hold of so we can purchase more books and e-books to meet your academic needs.

Find out more at
www.durham.ac.uk/library/morebooks

'There are not enough books in the library': is this the most common complaint received by most academic libraries? Not only is the ambiguous nature of the criticism a cause of frustration, one could argue that, taken at face value, it has little merit. Durham University has approximately 16,500 students and 1500 academic staff. The library stocks around 1.6 million printed items, has major collections of manuscripts and archives and provides access to more than 290,000 e-books. So whilst there are of course considerably larger libraries, condemning the resources as numerically insufficient seems harsh!

When I have asked for clarification of this perceived lack of books (whilst attending Staff Student Liaison Committees [SSCCs] in academic departments, for example), it usually becomes

- Academic members of staff would not be able to request items via this new route and should make their requests via departmental representatives as usual. We would accept requests from undergraduates and postgraduates (both taught and research).
- We would record the number of requests, what type of student and from which department requests were made. We would also make a very basic check as to the suitability of the materials being asked for (i.e. were they appropriate for an academic library?).
- We would ask the student making the request if they wanted to explain why they needed the material (but not insist on it). This would be helpful in several circumstances, including highlighting reading lists we hadn't received.
- If a requested item cost under £100 and was not in stock we would purchase it.
- The small percentage of items that cost over £100 would be referred to the appropriate academic liaison librarian for guidance as to their suitability before purchasing.
- Requests for items where copies were already in stock would also be forwarded to the appropriate academic liaison librarian for a quick decision as to whether more copies were needed.
- We would reply to every request indicating whether items would or would not be bought (and why).

The University Librarian, Jon Purcell, was able to set aside an initial budget of £10,000 to fund purchases recommended via the 'More books' campaign. This meant that departmental allocations would be unaffected. With the guidelines set and a firm understanding of what we hoped to achieve, what remained was to address the practical elements: When would the campaign run, how would we make people aware of it and who would manage it?

We decided that the Michaelmas term was a good time to begin the campaign, but to avoid the initial few weeks of term so that the publicity would not be lost in the sea of information that students receive at this time. Hence the campaign would begin in November and run until the end of the Epiphany term (or until the money ran out!). Publicity was arranged in-house, with screensavers and posters displaying the simple message that students now had a direct route through which they could ask the library to acquire materials. Publicity materials were also sent to academic departments. The 'More books' campaign was

further publicised at SSCCs and departmental boards of studies, which are attended by liaison librarians.

Two library assistants were given the task of monitoring the 'More books' recommendations, which would come in as an online 'More books request' via a newly created email address. Using the form would help in ensuring that we had all the information we needed for each request.

Thanks to our relatively low-key but effective publicity campaign, the scheme was quickly brought to the attention of the student body – which was reflected in an enthusiastic response! In the last two weeks of November following the scheme's official launch, a total of 69 requests were received. December saw 85 requests (a surprisingly high number, given that term officially ended on 15 December and most undergraduates would not have been in Durham for much of that month). The new academic term saw this upward trend continue, with requests peaking at 142 in February 2011. By the time the scheme was closed in mid-March a total of 436 requests had been made, resulting in the purchase of 331 additional books. The level of demand, together with other feedback, demonstrated that the ability to recommend books and get a prompt (and usually positive) decision was highly valued by students.

The statistics relating to who used the service also made for interesting reading. Unsurprisingly, the majority of requests (50%) came from undergraduates – to a large extent the scheme's intended beneficiaries – with only 14% from taught postgraduates. Perhaps the most surprising statistic was that 33% of requests were from research postgraduates. This sparked some significant internal debates over whether postgraduate researchers should be excluded, since they could already make purchase suggestions via other routes. There was also a feeling that we are unable to stock absolutely everything required for PhD-level research. Despite this, it was decided to accept such requests unless it clearly ran contrary to the other guiding principles of the scheme. In most cases, the books suggested by research postgraduates were not too specialised and were deemed to be of sufficient interest to other readers.

Of the 436 requests received, just 17% were for duplicate copies. A positive impact of the scheme, therefore, was to increase the breadth and depth of the library's collection, adding additional resources that were directly relevant to student needs. For a student, the key factor is whether

a copy of a book is available at the point they need it ('the right book for the right student at the right time', as the University Librarian, Jon Purcell, rightly says). The 'More books' campaign was well placed to highlight instances where the library held insufficient copies of a particular book. However, as with so many concerns discussed internally, this proved to be less of an issue than initially thought.

The campaign was just one strand used by the library in 2010–11 to try to address the perception of 'not enough books'. New, more robust reading-list procedures were put into place which, with the backing of senior university officials, required departments to submit reading lists for all taught modules to the library by 1 August. In excess of 95% of reading lists were received – an unprecedented achievement – which meant that the library could ensure that essential reading materials were in stock.

Running alongside this, a system of patron-driven e-book selection was implemented in conjunction with MyiLibrary. Bibliographic details for thousands of e-books were added to the library catalogue and could be viewed by library users. Under this arrangement, the first person to click on the full text link would be able to view the text free of charge; a second click would trigger an automatic purchase, with the amount deducted from a sum of money set aside by the library. From the student perspective, the process was seamless, providing immediate access to the text; from the library perspective, it ensured that the e-books purchased were actually used and not merely selected because they formed part of a bundle of titles offered by the publisher.

Inevitably, there were some elements which worked better than others and a few lessons were learned as the year progressed. Some of these changed the way the scheme will operate in 2011/12.

The most obvious benefit was that students were given a direct way to address what they felt were shortcomings in the library's holdings. They could recommend titles and be confident of a rapid decision. This helped the students feel that their comments were welcome and that their concerns would genuinely be considered and appropriate action taken. It also helped to alert the library to heavy demand on texts at an early stage and take action.

Acting in this responsive fashion also meant that books that were genuinely useful to students were ordered. Durham, like almost any other university library has its fair share of books recommended by academics, which have never been borrowed. The 'More books' scheme ensured that the materials bought reflected student needs.

An associated benefit was that 'More books' offered the opportunity to open a dialogue with students about other services the library could provide. Where a decision was taken not to purchase a suggested item, students were advised of alternatives, such as utilising the Document Delivery Service for an inter-library loan, or SCONUL Access. These are valuable services which undergraduates are often unaware of initially. The 'More books' campaign offered a way to raise awareness of these options at a much earlier stage.

One striking statistic that emerged from an analysis of the requests was that almost 50% were made by just five academic departments, while several departments submitted just one request each. Once they realised how effective the scheme was, some students made repeat requests. This led to fears in some quarters that individual departments were effectively receiving a supplement to their standard library allocation, or that some students were treating it as their own personal bookstore. However, looking at the overall statistics, there was no compelling evidence of 'serial recommenders'.

The disparity between the departments that took advantage of the scheme and those that didn't is perhaps more of a concern. Inevitably, the former were book-intensive departments (for example English and history), whilst the lowest users were mostly in the science faculty. A target for 2011–12 will be to try and publicise the scheme more actively to those departments with lower suggestion rates to make sure that they are fully aware of this opportunity to recommend books.

Two departments objected to the scheme on the grounds that there was no departmental involvement in the selection process and students could recommend texts that the departments did not want them to read. However, the library took the view that the ability to evaluate critically all academic research was a crucial part of the undergraduate education process and so, provided they were of an appropriate scholarly level, no suggestions were rejected on these grounds.

Overall, the response to the scheme was very favourable from academics and students alike. Feedback via formal committee structures (such as staff–student committees) was generally positive and students welcomed the opportunity to have some direct input into an area of critical importance for them. There were reservations in some quarters that, since the scheme by-passed the usual departmental approval process, it might lead to an imbalanced collection and see undergraduate courses given priority over research materials. In reality, the scheme’s restricted budget, which represented just a tiny proportion of the library’s overall expenditure on books, ensured that this did not happen.

There were concerns that postgraduate researchers might use the scheme to bypass the existing mechanisms in place to recommend books via their academic department. As noted above, a significant number of requests were received from researchers. However, where suggestions were of relevance to other students, they were considered. If they were felt to be specific to an individual piece of research and so fall outside the scope of the scheme, researchers were advised to contact their departmental library representative to recommend purchase in the normal way. Again, whether requests were accepted or not, they helped to establish contact with researchers and allowed the library to highlight alternative sources which would help the students throughout their research.

Given that the ‘More books’ campaign was planned and implemented in a short space of time, it ran very smoothly and efficiently, and a review ahead of the 2011–12 academic year suggested that only minor changes were necessary. Perhaps the most significant was trying to re-focus the scheme on supporting the provision of undergraduate texts – the original primary aim. The publicity will therefore be changed to make more explicit the fact that the scheme is targeted at undergraduates and taught postgraduates. Whilst recommendations from researchers will still be considered, all such requests will now be passed in the first instance to the relevant subject liaison librarian, who will decide whether to order to copy via the ‘More books’ scheme or whether it should be referred to the department for purchase from the departmental library allocation.

Additional publicity will also be targeted at departments that made relatively little use of the scheme in 2010/11 or registered lower scores relating to library provision in the National Student Survey. In this way, the library can respond directly to NSS concerns.

Finally, to ensure a more even spread of funds, the number of requests from specific individuals or departments will be more closely monitored. Whilst there is no intention of placing a limit on the number of requests that can be made, if it is felt that some individuals or departments are using a disproportionate amount of the budget, suggestions may be referred for purchase from the standard departmental library allocation, rather than using the funds of the ‘More books’ scheme.

Overall, the ‘More books’ campaign was a big success. From the library perspective it was a relatively light-touch initiative that was simple to set up and manage, but which was highly popular with the student body. Of course, we are not naive enough to think that the scheme will completely stop complaints that ‘the library doesn’t have enough books’, but we hope they will become fewer and that the library can categorically demonstrate that it is actively responding to such concerns.



**MORE
BOOKS**
is back!

www.durham.ac.uk/library/morebooks

