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# Review, revise, re-implement

The reading list process at Durham  
University Library

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## INTRODUCTION

A perennial problem facing all libraries is the issue of reading lists. Students (understandably) expect that libraries and academic staff will work together to ensure that the books recommended on reading lists are available from the university library in adequate numbers. Those of us who work in libraries, of course, will be aware that the reality is not quite so simple.

## READING LISTS AT DURHAM

A previous article in *SCONUL Focus*<sup>1</sup> highlighted the reading list process at Durham and a number of changes have been implemented to encourage higher submission rates. The university's Education Committee, conscious of increased expectations of students ahead of the 2012 fees increase, approved a mandate to the effect that all lecturers had to provide the library with a copy of their reading list by 31 August in each academic year.

The effect of this joined-up approach was successful beyond all expectations. In 2009–10, approximately 63% of undergraduate reading lists were received. Following the changes, this increased to an impressive 95% in 2010, making Durham the envy of many other libraries.

Yet despite this apparent success, there was still dissatisfaction with processes both internally and externally.

## SO WHAT WENT WRONG?

In a way, nothing went wrong. In fact, you could argue that everything went right – the earlier review and increased publicity campaign achieved the desired effect of increasing the number of lists received. However, this in itself created further problems.

One of the main difficulties was the 31 August deadline, which had originally been selected to try and fit in with both the academic timetable and the lead-in times the library needed to process reading lists and order books. Unfortunately, although academic staff could submit their reading lists at any point over the summer, in practice many treated the 31 August deadline as a prompt to start thinking about reading lists, not as a final deadline. Relatively few lists were received in the early part of the summer, with hundreds being submitted in the first few weeks of September. Since processing each list requires significant work from library staff, there was an inevitable backlog. Although the process was highly successful in terms of acquiring reading lists, it was less successful in ensuring that those lists could be processed in a timely fashion. This led to some dissatisfaction amongst academic departments and placed a tremendous strain on library staff.

## REVIEW, REVISE, RE-IMPLEMENT

Reading list processes at Durham had always been reviewed on an annual basis. However, following the difficulties faced in 2010–11, it was decided that a more systematic review was needed to identify problem areas and make recommendations for change.

To help provide a fresh perspective, the university's Strategic Planning & Change Unit was asked to lead a process review. This involved a range of library staff and a number of academics. Under their auspices, the entire process was broken down into individual steps which could be analysed to identify specific issues. Since they were able to take a more critical and less library-centric perspective, the Planning & Change Unit staff were able to ask some simple but very important questions. Often these boiled down to 'Why are things done this way?' or 'Could this not be done another way?' This encouraged the group to look again at processes and identify where improvements and greater efficiencies could be made. In the end, a list of over thirty key areas (each divided into a number of sub-sections) was identified along with recommendations for

change. Concerns ranged from the fairly obvious (the need to ensure efficient communication and sufficient staffing resources) to wider concerns outside the library's direct control (the length and format of some reading lists or the increased expectations of higher-fee-paying students).

## CH... CH... CH... CHANGES

The process review resulted in some fairly significant changes ahead of the 2012–13 academic year. Some of the main ones are outlined below:

### 1 Move to a 'changes-only' approach

Previously, there had been no easy way to check whether the library had received a copy of the reading list the previous year, and if it had, whether it was the same; this meant that a significant amount of staff time was devoted to checking lists that rarely changed from year to year. For 2012–13, it was agreed to move to a changes-only approach. Academic staff were specifically asked to highlight changes to their lists and only those items would be checked. If there were no changes, they were asked to confirm this and no further action would be taken (nor would follow-up reminders be sent).

### 2 Revised submission 'deadline'

The submission deadline has long been a source of endless debate. From a library perspective, an earlier deadline allows more time to process reading lists, order books and get them on the shelves ready for the academic year. Many academics, however, start finalising the content of reading lists only in September. In the end, a nominal deadline of 1 July was agreed. Whilst recognising that this would not be suitable for everyone, it encouraged earlier submission of lists and provided an incentive for doing so (see next point).

### 3 Chronological processing of reading lists

It was agreed that all reading lists would be processed in strict chronological order of the date received. Exceptions were allowed in the case of new lecturers taking up post over the summer and lists received from them were prioritised.

### 4 Demand-driven digitisation

In previous years, the library had attempted to digitise all 'essential' items on reading lists (where permitted by copyright licences) – a very time-consuming process. For 2012–13, it was agreed that items would be digitised only

if this was specifically requested by academics. This might initially seem a retrograde step, cutting back on the resources made available electronically. However, adopting this approach ensured that time was not wasted digitising little-used items. Digitisation was moved further up the workflow to allow scanning to be done at an earlier stage.

## 5 Improved methods of dealing with out-of-print material

The acquisition of out-of-print material was identified as a major problem, particularly in some areas where such material represented a significant portion of the lists: too much acquisitions staff time was spent tracing and ordering second-hand copies.

For 2012–13, it was proposed that acquisitions staff would check only Amazon Marketplace. If a second-hand copy was not available (or not available at a reasonable price), the academic member of staff would be informed and asked if they wished the library to continue looking for a second-hand copy. In most cases, they were happy to remove the book from their list or recommend an alternative, thus freeing up staff time.

## 6 Dedicated reading list team

Previously the reading list process had involved all library assistants. It was decided to use a smaller, dedicated team for the new system. Thus the team was quickly able to identify potential problems and built up a bank of experience in resolving them.

## 7 Communication

Communication was an essential element of the project. It was important to communicate the purpose of the process clearly and effectively at all stages and to manage the expectations of library staff, academic staff and students. Communications about the process were sent out regularly and email reminders were sent out when necessary. Inevitably, there were still some misunderstandings and the communications task is ongoing.

To support these changes, a new spreadsheet-based approach was developed. All items registered against a particular module code were listed. In many cases, there were items from previous iterations of the module reading list that had never been removed, resulting in some very long lists. As part of the process, academics were asked to mark all items which were no longer required,

meaning that there should now be a 'clean' baseline list reflecting the real reading list issued to students. This baseline version should mean that less work is required to update and maintain the spreadsheets in future.

The spreadsheets also showed how many times the books listed had been borrowed in the past 12 months, sometimes highlighting how little some reading list materials are used. Academic staff were asked to mark up these sheets to highlight changes required (items to add/delete), identify items required for digitisation and consider whether low-usage items needed to be in the short-loan collection (or not on the list at all).

It might seem a little odd to develop an in-house method of handling and processing reading lists when off-the-shelf packages offer similar features. There were, however, good reasons for doing so, the most important being that the library no longer had difficulty getting reading lists from academic members of staff.

## SOFTWARE SOLUTIONS?

The library is always keen to make current practices more efficient and effective. Analysis of the commercially available software had been on-going for some time. One system that was looked into in quite some depth was Talis Aspire. Initial investigations seemed to indicate that many institutions were looking to use Aspire as a way to develop a reading list process, but in those institutions there was currently little or no structured engagement in terms of acquiring reading lists from academics. However, this was something Durham had already achieved. Further investigations showed that the basic benefits that Aspire could bring were in fact things the library was already doing. These included:

- attaching specific materials to a digital list for a specific course
- including a range of material such as scans, freely available web content and deep-linked journal articles
- making this list available to users via both our webpage and the VLE
- allowing academics to indicate when an item was no longer applicable to a module

In addition, our investigations confirmed that the systems created and revised at Durham, to manage things such as the efficient acquisition of relevant amounts of material, the digitisation of print material, and deep linking to e-journal

articles, worked well because there was a solid staffing and process structure in place rather than a software-led system.

There are, however, some things that Durham's current setup cannot do. These include:

- structuring an online list in the exact way a lecturer has presented it. (The current online reading lists result in a list of resources that can be structured only in alphabetical order by author, title or material type. The library cannot therefore replicate a 'week by week' or 'material by importance' layout. This is perhaps the biggest disadvantage.)
- adding items that are not in stock
- direct interaction by academic staff with their reading list other than via a member of library staff

Hence, there is still room for improvement. But the real issue for Durham is to weigh the limited disadvantages of the current setup against the inevitable upheaval that moving to a new system would cause. Are the advantages above worth the staff-intensive lead-in to a new product and the time needed to train people to use it? After all, the library is getting the reading lists in and getting the materials on the shelves. That remains our fundamental aim. The question is whether that is enough...

#### **THIS YEAR**

Going into the 2012–13 reading list process with a firm shift towards a 'changes-only' approach, we knew we had to emphasise the advantages this would bring. Those departments that would perhaps have the most reason to be disgruntled about the changes were those that typically submitted complete reading lists well before the deadline. Hence, some advocacy was needed to explain how unnecessarily time-consuming it is to process a complete reading list which differs only slightly from the one received the previous year, especially when multiplied by the total number of lists received – typically well over 1200. The established timetable for communications with academic staff, in conjunction with more informal, ongoing advocacy via the Academic Liaison Librarians, reads as follows:

- *21 May 2012* Publicity sent to departmental contact regarding the reading list process
- *1 June 2012* Email sent to departmental contact to be forwarded to all academic staff requesting reading lists be sent to the library.

In-house library publicity regarding the submission of reading lists posted on plasma screens and screensavers

- *1 July 2012* 'Deadline' for reading list submission
- *23 July 2012* Reminder email sent to departmental contacts along with details of lists still to be received

In terms of results in 2012–13, the library had received 88% of taught undergraduate module reading lists by the start of the Michaelmas term, which for Durham is an acceptable figure. Looking specifically at the changes brought in this year, some things have worked very well whilst others will need further refinement. Specifically, there has been a mixed response from academic staff to being asked to update spreadsheets referring to existing reading lists rather than sending in whole lists. Generally, where the lists were relatively short, staff were happy to engage with the process. Around two-thirds of all reading list submissions were received in this format, which indicates the success of the system. (A sizeable proportion of the remaining third were new reading lists, which the library was happy to receive in any format.) However, some academic staff were unwilling to engage with submitting lists in this format. Reasons for this included:

- inability to use the software
- the feeling that the list was overly long to be edited in this way, particularly as the layout and format did not mirror their own reading list (e.g. was not week by week or by material importance)
- need for staff member to give a detailed explanation about a specific resource or actions for the library to take
- Other parts of the university had also asked them to produce a reading list in different format and staff unwilling effectively to do the same work twice

In response, the library acknowledged that staff who need to produce long reading lists in a format that the library cannot replicate may not have the time (or inclination) to scan through a spreadsheet in order to mark up a handful of changes from last year. Similarly, the library sympathises if staff are asked to produce a lengthy list twice in two different formats. So, a revised proposal for 2013–14 is to ask them in these circumstances to submit lists in whatever format they wish so long as they clearly mark up what has changed from last year and understand that the library will not check the whole list.

Understandably, the 1 July deadline was not popular with everyone! Academic staff with a legitimate reason for late submission (e.g. late appointments and late course confirmations) were assured that the library would act on their lists as a priority when they were submitted. For everyone else it was a matter of explaining the rationale behind the change and reminding them of the strict chronological order by which lists would be processed. Although it was still the case that a glut of reading lists was received around the end of August and beginning of September, submissions were more evenly spread through the summer, something the library had been aiming for. This, in conjunction with the dedicated team approach, allowed our acquisitions department to deal with reading list orders in a more even way. The smoothing-out of the workload was mirrored in the digitisation requests and the resultant workload. The tendency is to see an increase in requests as term approaches, but on the whole the workload was more evenly spread across the summer months.

#### CONCLUSIONS

The library is reasonably happy with the results achieved so far this academic year. The move to a 'changes-only' approach, and the processing of reading lists strictly in the order in which they were received (and within the overall stream of other requests to acquire materials), has improved the efficiency of the process. It has also made it more transparent and more equitable, and has in many cases reduced the administrative burden on academic staff. A number of recommendations for next year's process have already been made:

- The main priority for review in 2012–13 is to consider the process in conjunction with colleagues from the University Change Team. If the library further identifies the fundamental aims of the process as outlined last year, it will be able to focus on what still needs to be done to meet these aims.
- Continue advocacy with academic departments about the need for the submission of reading lists by 1 July deadline.
- Continue advocacy with academic departments about the value of notifying the library of 'changes only'.
- Continue advocacy with academic departments about the need for reading lists to be submitted in the correct format, bearing in mind that spreadsheets are required for colleagues who intend to use the course resources lists in duo. With the very longest

lists only it may be less appropriate, hence the library can accept changes in another format, provided those are changes and not the whole list.

It is important for the library to acknowledge how far Durham has come. The library now regularly obtains and processes around 90% of lists for taught undergraduate modules, thus making the vast majority of all prescribed materials available to students – which should of course be a core aim of any higher education library. Although there are always things that we could do better, there are plenty of things already being done well!

#### REFERENCE

- 1 Stephen Atkinson, Nicola Conway and Ben Taylorson, 'Reading lists – pitching it right!' *SCONUL Focus*, 50 (2010), pp.75–79