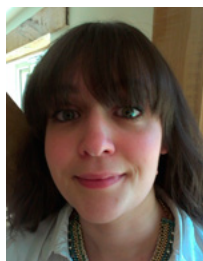# Gathering user insight on a shoestring

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Library Services at Liverpool John Moores University (LJMU) is entering a period of significant change over the coming years as it works towards the development of a new flagship library (due in 2018) at the Copperas Hill site in the city centre. As a result, the library has an exciting opportunity to design a service that genuinely puts user experience at the heart of service delivery. The starting point for these developments involved investigating user perception and insight in order to inform planning for the new library. Although the department was aware of larger-scale studies carried out by both Edge Hill University (Ramsden and Carey, 2014) and Judge Business School (University of Cambridge) (Priestner, 2015), it was not in a position to commit the resources, either human or financial, required to run studies of this magnitude and scope. Therefore the challenge was to find a mechanism to gather user insight but with limited budget and staff resource.

The solution lay in carrying out small-scale diary mapping exercises. The pilot exercises took place in 2014 and was led by a small project team of only three members. It was agreed to recruit up to twenty students to maintain a free text diary detailing all the times they used the physical library during a three-week period. It was felt that this method would encourage the user to consider not just how they used the library, but also why they chose to engage in that way and what their perception of the experience was. The project team met with the participants prior to the study and outlined what the purpose of it was and what the end objectives were, and offered some general guidelines as to how to complete the diaries. A £50 voucher was offered as an incentive in return for submitting a completed diary satisfactorily. The criteria for a satisfactory return were inclusion of more than five interactions with the library and sufficient description of that experience to provide the insight required.

Following the specified three-week period, fifteen diaries were received. Despite our not having targeted specific participants, there was a reasonably representative sample of undergraduates and postgraduates, and full- and part-time students across a range of disciplines and levels. The data was analysed, both by the project team reading through all the diaries to gather insight, and by using Leximancer concept mapping software, which identifies key themes and trends from qualitative data sources. The analysis identified two themes as particularly strong: space and books.

With regard to space, it was interesting to note how many of the participants valued the scholarly environment of the libraries, believing it to be conducive improving their studies. Several participants also highlighted their appreciation of the silent areas and the efforts staff made to maintain silence in these areas. Some commented that studying in the building where they had to hand in their assignment maximised the available time for completing their work.

The second key trend identified by this study was that of books, demonstrating the high value that students still attach to the print collections. Many respondents made particular reference to the fact that their decision to use the library over and above other study spaces was influenced by the accessibility of print resources for their academic discipline. Some students chose to visit the library where their subject's print resources were kept, even if another library was nearer. This high value placed on print resources was not reflected in similar references to the library's online resources, although this may have been because the study asked specifically about user experience of library spaces.

Nevertheless, despite the valuable insight described above, some difficulties were experienced with this methodology. Firstly, although the project team felt that these diaries made very interesting reading, the disparate returns made data analysis time-consuming, and it was difficult to draw overall conclusions. In addition, because a set template was not provided, responses ranged from 3,000-word essays to 20-line tables, and from highly insightful descriptions of library activity to personal details and descriptions of issues that were unrelated

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to this study. It was felt that were the project to be run again, it would be advisable to request more structure to the returns.

Because of the lack of reference to use of the electronic library, and to help fulfil a strategic aim (namely, to develop our digital collections and usage), it was decided to rerun a version of this project when the opportunity arose in 2015. This time, focus would be on user perception of the electronic library to see whether the electronic collections were valued as highly as the print. Drawing on the lessons from the first iteration of this exercise, a fixed template was created for the reflective logs to aid with data analysis. Following advice from colleagues who attended the influential UX conference held in Cambridge in March 2015, a table was created for responses to the following headings:

- Date
- Where are you?
- What are you using for access?
- E-library resources used
- What are you wanting to do?
- Positive aspects of experience?
- Negative aspects of experience?

After a short promotional campaign, 42 expressions of interest were received to take part in the study. Unlike the previous time the study was run, the respondents were extremely heavily weighted towards students in the Applied Professional Studies Faculty. Therefore they were carefully selected so as to have as varied a sample as possible. Only 8 participants returned their diaries, with a further participant submitting more general reflections, because of an insufficient level of engagement with the e-library during the fortnight.

Although the sample size means that it is impossible to draw specific conclusions, the responses did suggest areas for further investigation. For example, there was some correlation between satisfaction with the search facility and how specific the search was. When searches were based on keywords there were some complaints that search results contained too many irrelevant entries. Another area for potential further investigation is e-books, usage of which was very little mentioned, with respondents being more likely to use the online library to consult the catalogue for print titles than to download e-books. This will inform ongoing developments of e-book content and platforms.

Another pleasing general trend was the overall contentment with the electronic library itself, with several references being made to its convenience and the range of resources available. Paradoxically, there were both compliments relating to the login process ('quick login process') and complaints ('Logging-in to the E-Library can be slightly confusing with the multiple logins').

As with the pilot, this study had some limitations. Firstly, the sample was extremely small and very heavily weighted towards one particular faculty, whilst another faculty was entirely unrepresented. This is likely to be due to timing: constraints on staff resource limited meant that the study had to run during the last two weeks of semester, so many students would have already completed their assignments or would not be actively engaging with the electronic library. Postgraduates were heavily represented in comparison to undergraduates. Again, timing is the likely reason for this: at such a late stage in the term, postgraduates were far more likely to still be actively studying than undergraduates. Therefore, it is highly recommended that future iterations of this study be run earlier in the semester so as to attract a more representative user group.

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A second limitation of the study was caused by the greater structure of the returns, following findings from the pilot. Although it did succeed in making the data analysis much easier, the findings lacked the same level of insight into the emotional aspect of interactions with the library, which was a real strength of the 2014 pilot. As a result, it is proposed that future versions of this study include a free text section on 'general perceptions', in order to gather some further qualitative data to encourage more students to share their feelings about how well the library meets their needs and expectations.

The purpose of these exercises has been to inform new library developments. Therefore, findings have been fed back to the library development team. For example, the 2014 study showed how much students prefer to study near their subject resources when in the library. As a result, the new library will incorporate subject hubs throughout the building, complete with study spaces available nearby. Similarly, the overwhelming appreciation of silent areas has supported the proposal for a silent reading room at Copperas Hill, where the design and the infrastructure will contribute to making the area truly silent.

The findings are also having a current impact on service design. The insights gained in the 2015 study have been fed back to the Collections and Digital Systems team who are considering how to improve accessibility of the electronic library, based on this feedback.

Although this style of study does not have the same level of comprehensiveness and insight as the large-scale studies described above, the project team would recommend this methodology based on the following benefits:

- Low resource intensity. On both occasions when LJMU Library Services has run a diary mapping exercise, the core project team has consisted of only three people (albeit with input from others) who have conducted all aspects of the project, including creating materials, recruitment, data collection, analysis and dissemination. In addition, the budget (excluding staff time) has not exceeded £1,000 for incentive vouchers, making it ideal if time and / or budget constraints inhibit wider scale studies.

- Level of insight. In spite of the small sample sizes, the project team felt that they understood the user experience more fully and had some previously held assumptions challenged by the data received. This in turn has been fed back to the relevant service development areas and given confidence that improvements are genuinely user inspired.

- Improved user engagement. An unexpected benefit of the study is that on each occasion, participants have felt more engaged with the library.

- Flexibility. This type of study can easily be adapted to suit different requirements. For example, it can be tailored to focus on different aspects of the service (e.g. library spaces, electronic resources). Equally, it can be effective as a research tool with either a small or large sample size, and can be implemented relatively easily.

These exercises have provoked so many discussions and areas for further investigation that the project team are currently proposing to expand this study to cover all disciplines and levels. This will help to map service interactions, with a view to designing the service for Copperas Hill according to user preference, rather than dictating user behaviour. In addition, it is hoped that by implementing a larger-scale study, subject-based trends and differences in study levels can be identified. All this will improve the department's marketing capabilities and can help ensure that the service best meets user requirements both now and in the future.

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References

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