Marketing and launching the reading lists service to academics and students

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Background

In 2013 Royal Holloway Library Service organised a reading list task force that included academic staff, student representatives and library staff to review the need and functionality requirements of reading list software and reading list processes in general. This led to the procurement of Talis Aspire. The Reading List Project was one of the key streams of the Library Systems Redevelopment Programme, and as a major college project has been the foundation of much of the engagement of academic staff with the reading list system.
The Reading List System (RLS) was launched in spring 2014 with five pilot departments from different faculties (Criminology & Sociology, Earth Sciences, English, Geography and Politics & International Relations). This confirmed some of the suspected differences between departments, including length of lists and ratio of articles to books.

In summer 2015 we widened participation to all departments and by the end of 2017 we had 98% of lists from across the college. The success of the system has been largely down to a multi-stakeholder approach that targets everybody, including college management, academic staff, students and administrators. This paper will set out how we succeeded.
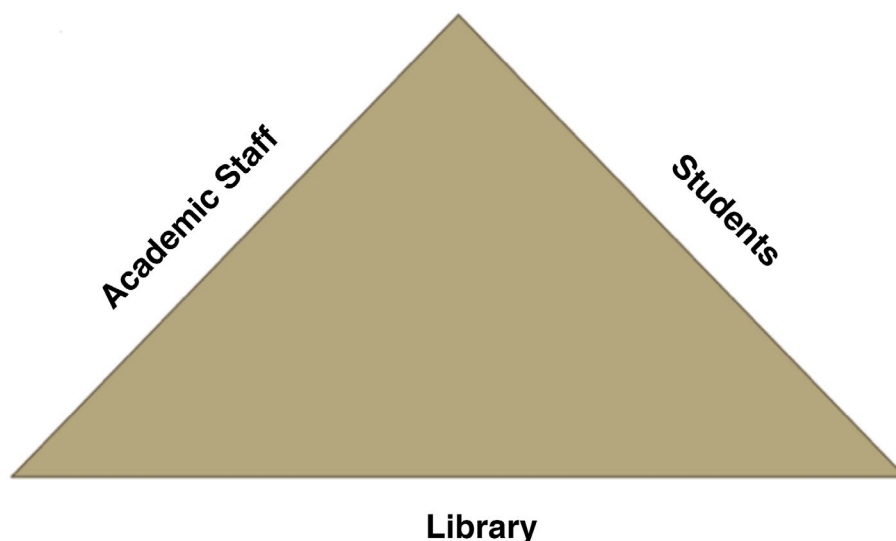

Figure 1 Three main groups of stakeholders in the RLS, which all have differing needs

Strategy

Every year at least one paper on the RLS is sent to the Learning and Teaching Quality Committee (LTQC), which has helped sustain continued college support for the project. These papers include statistics that have helped foster some competition between departments. After every committee meeting we see an upturn in requests for training and lists being sent in. The committee provides a platform for discussion about what obstacles are preventing engagement, and several quick wins have come out of this, including solving misunderstandings between library and academic staff over what a reading list is.

The LTQC papers have also led to communications coming from first the Registrar and then (in 2017) his replacement, the Chief Operating Officer, who sent out an email requesting reading lists be sent to the library by the end of June. This resulted in a higher than usual number of lists being submitted, which enabled them to be added to the system and books to be ordered in time for the start of term.

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Department (Red=Lists to input)	Lists Held (%)	Lists Input (%)
Biological Sciences (DONE)	100%	100%
Classics	74%	74%
Computer Science (DONE)	100%	100%
CPS	100%	95%
Crim Soc	94%	94%
Drama and Theatre Studies	129%	103%
Earth Sciences	69%	69%
Economics	93%	93%
English (Inc. Creative Writing)	104%	92%
French (DONE)	100%	100%
Geography	92%	88%
German (DONE)	100%	100%
History	67%	63%
Information Security (DONE)	100%	100%
Italian (DONE)	100%	100%
Law (DONE)	100%	100%
Management (Inc. Accounting/Business Infor	86%	85%
Mathematics (DONE)	100%	100%
Media Arts	88%	88%
Modern Languages (Inc. Liberal Arts)	77%	77%
Music	98%	98%
Physics (DONE)	100%	100%
Politics and International Relations (Inc. Phil	83%	80%
Psychology	93%	91%
Spanish (DONE)	100%	100%

Figure 2 Example of a table from the LTQC paper that helped foster competition between departments

The content of this email and a subsequent one sent out each year by the Information Consultants (ICs) was written in collaboration with Associate Deans from Arts and Sciences. Unlike previous emails that had been sent to academics about the reading list, this one anticipated queries from academic staff. As a result, over 700 reading lists were received directly from academic staff in 2016. Furthermore, because of the strategic importance of the Reading List Project, the library received extra funding from the college, with over £250,000 spent on reading list material, including £116,000 of Strategic Development Fund money in 2015–16.

The college has also funded a team of 4.5 full-time equivalent reading list assistants. This has provided a dedicated team who input lists, update lists, contact academic staff and order all the material from the lists. This team won a Staff Recognition award in 2016, which acknowledges the importance of the work they do in the college.

The other driver for the success of the RLS was the building of our new library. This holds a high-use collection that comprises primarily material from reading lists and occupies the entire ground floor of the building. The creation of this collection has enabled us to push for those reading lists we didn't receive at the end of 2016–17. Now the high-use collection is operational, students complain if a book isn't in it – we hope this will open even more conversations with academic staff.

Engagement

We knew from the start of the project that engagement with departments would be vital. If we could not get the buy-in from academics about the value of reading lists or get them to meet deadlines, then the project would ultimately fail. The team of five ICs attended School and Departmental Boards

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in order to demonstrate the system, explain how it could benefit both staff and students and answer any questions or concerns that the staff had. The Associate Director for Academic and User Services would attend the higher-level faculty boards to discuss the more strategic aims of the project with the heads of department. Where possible the ICs would also present at each department's Teaching and Learning Committees to show the pedagogical value of having reading lists.

One of the departments we worked very closely with was Psychology, as they were most sceptical about the project: we struggled for a long time even to get reading lists that went beyond one textbook per module, though we knew they were heavy journal users. However, once we started to understand more about their concerns, we found that they feared they would not be able to update their readings whenever they wanted. A number of group and one-to-one trainings sessions for academics were run by the ICs to teach them how to edit and update their own lists. This timed very well with the new Learning Tool Interoperability (LTI) that Talis had been working on and allowed the academics to embed each week's readings into our Virtual Learning Environment, Moodle, and hide future weeks from students.

Successes

At the end of the academic year 2016–17 we had 98% of the 1,171 modules that ran that year published in the reading list system. This meant that when we retrieved all the data from Talis for the high-use collection, we were satisfied that the majority of the correct books would be in there, making it much easier for students to find and access those essential textbooks.

By the end of September 2017 we had already received just over 45% of reading lists. This is our highest ever proportion by this time of year.

We currently have 141 lists that are owned by academics and are updated entirely by them. We just review these through the new reviews system in Talis. We have even more academics who edit part of lists themselves.

Moving forward

In previous years the next academic year's lists have been in draft during the rollover process. However, this year we published them live for the first time, which meant that academics would be encouraged to work on their reading lists over the summer, and students could access the lists straightaway. It is our intention to publish our lists live in future. One key thing that will help us meet this target is for us to be able to improve our access to modules and estimated student numbers as early as possible. We are working with the departments and liaising with professional departments across the college to get access to real-time student numbers, as currently many departments will not pass on their student numbers until December.

Once all the lists are in the system, the team can start reviewing them and ensuring that all the metadata is up to date, working through those items that have been added without being flagged for level of importance. We may want to look at the staffing model of the reading list team for future years to ensure that we have enough staff at the busiest times. The team of ICs will also be working hard with the academics to encourage them to start taking control of their own lists, again reducing the workload of the reading list assistants.

Conclusion

The success of the system has been down to a combination of agile response to departmental needs and requests, keeping the system on the agenda at strategic committees where the right people are, and raising the profile through promotion, student feedback and the new library.

We also asked some SCONUL members how their libraries were involved in reading lists and to offer up any top tips for maximising academic engagement. Here are a couple of responses.

Does your institution have a mandate requiring academic staff to submit reading/resource lists?

I wouldn't describe it as a mandate as such but academics are invited, encouraged and persuaded to submit reading lists. In addition there is a stated "minimum requirement" for module VLE pages and a reading list is included in that requirement. Our reading list system creates an entry for every module being delivered across the various Schools of the University and this year the Library did an analysis of all empty reading lists with students registered on the course. Some of the modules really didn't require reading lists as they were placements or practical/project based but some did appear to be missing lists. On LORLs we have 3,259 reading lists; when we checked modules that are running and could be expected to have a reading list we only had 269 which were empty, so we have around 92% of our reading lists populated which is pretty impressive, although I can't guarantee that all the lists are up to date! The details of the 269 empty modules were passed to the appropriate Academic Librarians who have since done some investigation and diplomatic consultation with the academics in order to get these lists populated, so we should have an even higher percentage of reading lists populated now.

Who has responsibility for populating reading/resource lists?

Again it is difficult to give a definitive answer: the academics are responsible for adding and updating their own reading lists but the Library offers a sympathetic ear. We send reminders to all academics with details of the reading lists they are responsible for twice a year and ask them to update them, once just before the start of the academic year and then again before the start of semester two. The Library offers training sessions to academics on how to edit reading lists, there is information on our website and when our Academic Librarians meet up with new members of academic staff the reading list system is explained to them. In practice a lot of our academics do engage with the system but equally quite a few need help and Library staff regularly do this by adding individual items (and in some cases whole lists) to the system to help academics out.

If responsibility sits within the library, who takes on the role?

In the Support, Collections and Systems Team of Loughborough Library there is a smaller group of individuals who deal with reading lists, book acquisitions and ereserves (digital chapters/articles). The team is headed up by the Taught Course Provision Librarian and there are four Library Assistants (2.8 fte). This team deals with all reading list enquiries and orders all the print and ebooks for the Library as well as dealing with all requests for ereserves from start to finish. The Library Assistants do a lot of editing of reading lists as well as adding items to them. They also do a lot of quality control work on the lists ensuring that items link to the library catalogue, that the urls work and that appropriate notes are added, e.g. what passwords are required to access the material.

Which system does your institution use?

Here at Loughborough University we use an open source system that was developed in house called LORLs. The advantage of using this system is that as our IT colleagues built and designed it they are on hand to help out when we discover problems or identify enhancements that we would like. The IT team here at Loughborough have been very helpful with the system and it is of enormous benefit to us that we can contact them and get fixes or improvements on an ad hoc basis.

Jane Bramley
Support Librarian,
Loughborough University

What are your top tips for maximising academic engagement?

I think diplomacy is key and being sympathetic to the problems faced by academics. We will often add lists to the system on their behalf and then ask them to keep it updated. By meeting the academic halfway we have helped them with their problem rather than adding to it and that usually encourages them to engage with the system. The University has recently changed its policy regarding ereserves so that they now all need to be made available via the reading list system rather than the VLE. Rather than marketing this as a negative the Library is promoting it, just add whatever you need to the system and we can do the rest: check copyright, obtain the item, ensure it has the appropriate cover sheet and report it on your behalf. This should make their life easier, not harder and means that it is now even more important that they engage with the reading list system.

Getting academics to understand that we are helping them, not adding to their workload, is an important message to get out there. Contacting the Library to explain that they need a new book purchasing for a module they are teaching and that it is a key item and there are x number of students on the course actually takes longer than just logging into LORLs and adding an ISBN to their reading list. Reading lists should be seen as a time saver, not another pointless administration task to be dealt with.

It is also worth pointing out to the academics that online reading lists are beneficial to the students as they help them locate and access their material more easily which, in turn may lead to them giving higher satisfaction scores!

Does your institution have a mandate requiring academic staff to submit reading/resource lists?

No, but it would be useful to have one. Lecturers are generally emailed by Subject Librarians in mid-August to catch any early lists and then again in early September. Some Subject Librarians also contact administrative staff in Schools to get reading lists from them.

Who has responsibility for populating reading/resource lists?

Subject Librarians contact relevant module contacts in their School for an updated reading list. The lecturer (or member of administrative staff) sends the list to the Library and the Subject Librarian, in conjunction with library assistants, work through the lists to check for availability, new editions and potential for scanning and if the latest edition is available or if it is available as an e-book. Lists are uploaded to SharePoint with a cover sheet. There is a detailed procedure for dealing with reading lists which is used by all staff.

If responsibility sits within the library, who takes on the role?

See above.

Which system does your institution use?

We use SharePoint, although a designated library reading list tool would be very useful. This would require buy-in from Schools, and a recognised mandate for staff.

What are your top tips for maximising academic engagement

Contact academics early, both as a reminder and also to offer assistance. This encourages them to submit. Suggest that annotated lists be sent back to academics and that they might update themselves for next year. Some academics are then able to tell you the following year that lists are up to date

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as per whatever date. Of course checks would still be made but not starting from scratch again.

A good library rep who is happy to chase up colleagues for lists is helpful, and it also helps to keep regular contact with the reps and to keep asking them for reading lists.