

# **Institute of Sport and Exercise Science students' perception of library resources and their availability**

**Carly Sharples** (University of East Anglia) and  
**Nick Breeze** (University of Worcester)

[c.sharples@uea.ac.uk](mailto:c.sharples@uea.ac.uk), [n.breeze@worc.ac.uk](mailto:n.breeze@worc.ac.uk)

**Keywords:** Information Literacy; Information Skills; Libraries; Teaching; Undergraduate studies.

## **Abstract**

While students appear to find library resources difficult to understand and use, they also seem reluctant to ask for help or unwilling to persevere when searching does not yield instant results. Focusing on undergraduate students studying Sport and Exercise Science, this paper discusses the findings of focus group interviews conducted with each undergraduate year group. The students were asked about their expectations of the library service and how they had acquired the information skills needed to use library resources. Students struggled to articulate individual skills required for successful library searches and frequently identified library instruction with boredom and frustration. The findings indicate that students expect using library resources to be easy, find librarian-led library teaching to be unrealistic, and develop a strategic searching strategy whereby as little time is spent on researching as possible. While primarily the views of ISES students, the findings could be applied to the wider student body. The paper recommends further investigation into students' strategic searching and how this relates to their information literacy needs.

## **Background**

The University of Worcester has striven in recent years to equip students with the information skills they need to navigate the resources provided by the Information and Learning Services (ILS) with confidence, the ability to

evaluate the information they find, and reference their sources correctly in their academic work. Information skills are delivered through a plethora of means, including lectures, hands-on practice sessions, print and online guides, video tutorials, email enquiry service and one-to-one student sessions. Nevertheless, student perception of the library resources often appears to be of a complicated and difficult information landscape, where students are unsure of which sources of information to use, how to find them, and how to improve their abilities in information location.

The use of resources by students has been examined in the literature regarding this area, including the debate regarding the preferred way in which students would like to receive assistance, either online or face-to-face. Certainly when it comes to online resources students want an easy and 'gratifying' user experience (Sadeh, 2008). Studies point to the ease and apparent success of searching Google as the primary reason for student high expectations of electronic library resources (Advic and Eklund, 2010; Sadeh, 2008), and the researcher has been told personally by students that they would rather use Google as they find library systems too confusing. In terms of library resource interfaces, the University of Worcester has worked hard to improve its online service and implemented the discovery tool Summon (University of Worcester, 2013) in November 2011 to help address this issue.

While students may struggle to use resources, they also seem unwilling to persevere, or to ask for assistance (Rickman and Budrovich, 2010; Ismail, 2010). Both Advic and Eklund (2010) and Biddix et al. (2011) discuss students' preference for finding information based on convenience, even though they were aware that they could have found more credible sources by searching library resources. This perhaps uncomfortable discovery that students would prefer to use less academic information sources because they are easier to access highlights the need to find a way to give students more confidence using library resources.

This study sought to better understand the students' perceptions, to discover what they expected from the library and its resources, and how this compared

to their experience of using them. Furthermore, the way in which students were taught or acquired information skills, and students' opinions on information teaching, were additional aspects that this study sought to investigate. It was then hoped that the results could be used to help improve and evolve the service to suit the needs and preferences of the student body more closely.

## **Methodology and Methods**

A constructivist lens was adopted at the outset of the study as it would be the students' perspectives that would be investigated. This recognised that, as the phenomena under scrutiny would be subjective, 'truth' in this context, would be relative (Baxter and Jack, 2008:545). Case Study was selected as an appropriate methodology with which to better understand the 'particularity and complexity' (Stake, 1995) of the students' perceptions, opinions and attitudes to the library resources and their availability. Focus group interviews with semi-structured questions were chosen as the method of data collection, followed by inductive analysis (Thomas, 2006) of the recordings, which were thematically coded. This analysis was undertaken using the qualitative software package NVivo (QSR International, 2013); the process adopted was an iterative one, where the identified coding categories were continually re-evaluated by the researchers as the analysis progressed, through reflexively and repeatedly interrogating the data (Srivastava and Hopwood, 2009).

Once the project had gained ethical clearance, the librarian for the Institute of Sport and Exercise Science (ISES) worked with the department to organise the focus group interviews in order to engage with students and ascertain their perceptions of the library resources and service they had experienced. ISES Student Academic Representatives (StARs) from across the whole institute were targeted as prospective participants. The researchers considered that all ISES student courses were academic in nature and therefore all StARs would need to make use of services provided by ILS. Initially all StARs (approximately 30) were emailed by the librarian about the project. The librarian then attended a general meeting of all StARs (about 10 StARs

attended) to explain the project further and to ask for participants. As compensation for the time students gave to the project an hours' pay equivalent to the rate earned by University Student Ambassadors was also offered.

Three focus group interviews were held during May 2012; one for each undergraduate year group (levels 4, 5 and 6) with students representing a number of the courses offered by ISES. These groups were intended to explore the experiences of the students in a non-judgemental manner, to find out if they felt they had the skills to exploit the resources available to them. An important element to gathering this data was that the focus group interviewer would not be the librarian, academic, or a member of library staff, but the ISES project officer, a non-teaching researcher. It was hoped this approach would enable students to be assured of their anonymity and feel more able to answer the focus group questions frankly and honestly.

A pilot focus group was held in order to 'sound out' the initial focus group semi-structured questions, which were subsequently re-designed to be more specific, with the aim of helping students understand the essence of the question more clearly and therefore be able to provide a more nuanced answer. Arrangements for the three focus groups interviews were then made. Actual student attendance varied from 1 person to 4 people, as not all the participants who indicated they would take part attended; it was decided to continue with the interview with one participant in the form of a one-to-one interview using the same semi-structured questions. Despite this limitation, the researchers felt that interesting and relevant data was gathered for each year group. It should be noted that data was collected prior to the opening of the new University library 'The Hive', so this paper refers to the students' experiences of using Peirson Library. Indeed, the researchers sought to focus on the experience of students up to the point of data capture, rather than looking forward to any expected changes that moving to 'The Hive' would necessitate.

The researchers listened to the recordings, noting interesting points raised by participants and time-stamping them against the audio. These points were then categorised thematically, with both researchers continually and critically questioning their analyses in an iterative manner, until agreement was reached, resulting in the key themes that are presented in the following section.

## **Findings**

Using the inductive coding process described in the previous section, the following themes were identified from the interview data and are discussed in turn in this section: Expectations; Positive library attitudes; Improvements; Physical library conditions; User knowledge; Barriers; Teaching; Strategic learning; Value of the library and resources.

### **Expectations & Positive library attitudes**

When asked about their expectations of the library before starting their course, students spoke mainly about physical library attributes, including books, computers, friendly staff, and the right resources for their subject. One student also indicated an expectation that the library would be simple and straightforward to use. These expectations were partly met, as students expressed positive attitudes towards the library building, study spaces, staff, range of services and 24 hour open study area. The introduction of the library search engine Summon was also identified as a useful tool provided by the library service.

### **Improvements & Physical library conditions**

When asked about improvements to the library students spoke almost exclusively about physical library attributes. Only one student suggested the library needed more e-books and online journals. Students wanted more computers, more printers and better control over noise in the library. Most interestingly, there was one comment about the availability of librarians and that a 'couple of librarians [were] not sure about some things'. This could betray a student expectation that librarians will always be available to answer students' queries, and will have answers immediately to hand.

## **User knowledge & Barriers**

One of the questions the students were asked was what they understood by the term 'information skills'. The students required a lot of drawing out on this topic, and their initial reactions are characterised by long pauses and hesitancy. Students were eventually able to identify: finding information, computer skills, using journals and reading and interpreting them. Primarily, students believed they gained these skills through trial and error, and would prefer to ask a friend for help rather than a librarian or library assistant.

Students identified paper guides and handouts as the most useful tools they used when they needed help. Students would also ask library staff on the front desk, and one student had used YouTube videos. This question however did prompt some comments of user frustration with the library resources: 'if you want a journal you have to scroll down loads and all you see is books'. The student here is referring to the discovery tool Summon, and their comment demonstrates a lack of knowledge, an assumption the technology provided is deficient, and unwillingness from the student to seek further assistance.

It was notable that the main barrier identified by students trying to access information was difficulty accessing journals and books. They described it as 'confusing', 'time consuming' and a 'hassle', particularly when they first started using the library. This applied to both navigating the library online resources, and finding their way around the building, locating shelf-marks, and using the self-service machines. Yet, library teaching was also described as boring and difficult for students to concentrate on, which leaves a gap between the student's need for library instruction, and their willingness to seek it, or even accept it when provided.

## **Teaching**

The adjective used most frequently to describe library teaching was 'boring'. In particular, the third year students described a lack of engagement with information skills teaching and a resentment of the time it took: 'That's why I stay away from it, it takes so much time.' These particular participants

recognised the necessity of information skills sessions, but wanted them to be more concise. The students first and foremost identified referencing as a skill they both needed and were taught. With a little encouragement, students were also able to identify reading and understanding as information skills, but no students cited selecting keywords or choosing where to search as skills in themselves.

All year groups seemed unsure as to whether they had ever been 'taught' by a librarian. One participant was clear they had never been taught by a librarian, but then referred to a skill session on Summon which would necessarily have been led by one of the university librarians. When asked directly, there was some negativity associated with the idea of librarian-led sessions:

'Introductions are useful but they are boring.' 'I'd say lecturers because I listen to them more. I did not really listen to the librarian'. 'Could have just given out a sheet.'

Furthermore, students complained that library induction sessions were repeated across modules at the beginning of the Autumn semester, causing them to automatically 'switch off' when being taught library information.

Perhaps of most interest to the researchers was the participants' assertion that librarian-led demonstrations of online resources lacked authenticity as they never demonstrated the difficulties students regularly encountered (e.g. not being able to connect to full text, or not finding relevant results). This may suggest that practical sessions for information skills teaching have more value for the students than demonstration lectures. Overall though, students indicated they would prefer systems to be intuitive and to 'learn by doing' than receive library instruction.

### **Strategic Learning**

One of the key themes that emerged from the data, which the researchers perhaps did not anticipate, concerned the approach of students to using the library only when their studies required them to. More than one student expressed the belief that they did not need to use many of the library

resources: '[My] first year did not require much literature.' '[You] don't need much new knowledge to pass.' These comments suggested to the researchers a strategic pattern of behaviour with regard to the library – students used library resources only when they felt they needed to. This observation went further, as some students indicated an awareness that their knowledge of resources was limited, but they were not motivated to ask for further help.

The students lack of motivation seems related both to their perception of library teaching as 'boring' and their desire for the library and library resources to be intuitive and easy to use. More than one student cited Google Books (Google, 2013a) and Google Scholar (Google, 2013b) as their primary sources of information. These students preferred to make use of the resources they find intuitive and simple to understand and that are easily available to access, rather than make use of the library and the library resources. The researchers found this attitude difficult to unpick, as it could imply that a) the students did not understand the academic nature of the literature they chose not to access, or b) they preferred to take the easiest, possibly lazy approach to research, not caring whether their sources were of an academic nature or not.

### **Value of the libraries and resources**

Overall, the students recognised the need for journals and books to complete their studies, and there was some positive feedback about the library discovery service Summon and e-resources in general. One student also identified library instruction as valuable: 'I wouldn't have known how to use the e-resources before someone came [to teach us].' However, for some students the information accessed through Google Books (2013a) and Google Scholar (2013b) was enough for them to 'get-by', so for these students, library teaching was an intrusion and a time waster. Students valued the library as a space to access computers, print documents, gain resolution to IT queries, and to study.

### **Conclusions:**



From the findings, there are a few key areas for action that can clearly be identified. Student expectations of the library were that it would provide them with enough of the right resources to complete their work. There was also a perception that information should be easy to access, and the data shows that this expectation was not always met. In particular, students identified the complexity of finding journal articles and navigating online systems as a barrier to using the library, significant enough in some cases to cause them to simply give up. Students also expected a significant amount of the information they needed to be available to them online, on-campus computer access, space to work, friendly library staff, and help to be immediately available.

Students did not expect any information teaching from librarians or library staff, or even help beyond that of paper guides and help-sheets. While students were able to say they had used online help, YouTube videos and other online sources, they needed to be prompted to identify them and clearly did not expect them as part of their library service. Perhaps instead, their expectation was that the library would be straightforward to use, so significant amounts of help - online or taught - would not be necessary.

The other aspect that can be drawn out from the findings is that students do not seem to have a strong preference regarding who provides their library instruction as long as they are given the skills they need to use the resources. Indeed, this study does present some evidence to suggest that being taught by librarians actually caused the students to disengage with information skills instruction, despite recognising that it may be useful. Perhaps the most useful finding of this study is that students found demonstrations by librarians to be unrealistic, encountering none of the barriers and difficulties students themselves face when searching online.

The findings may also suggest that librarians should work more closely with lecturers to ensure that they themselves are able to teach students the information skills students need, and are confident in using online resources. Some students demonstrated a 'strategic' approach to learning through their focus group answers, in that they will only do as much work as they perceived

they needed to do to get the grade they desired. Librarians are not likely to be sought for help by these students, as they are unmotivated to ask for help and see library instruction as boring and time-wasting. For these students, perhaps having lecturers who are confident in their own abilities to navigate the information landscape is all they need.

### **Recommendations:**

Following the discussion above of the findings from this study, the following recommendations are put forward for further consideration:

- The finding that students find librarian-led demonstrations to be unrealistic is a useful observation that should be taken into consideration for future planning and teaching of library sessions.
- The observation that students approached their use of the library strategically merits further investigation – can this insight into their searching behaviour help us focus our information teaching more appropriately?
- This study focussed only on a small number of undergraduate students from ISES, and as such is necessarily limited. The researchers would suggest that the findings of this study could be used as a pilot study for a wider investigation involving students from a variety of disciplines and perhaps from a range of Institutions.

## References

Avdic, A. and Eklund, A. (2010) Searching reference databases: what students experience and what teachers believe that students experience, *Journal of Librarianship and Information Science*, Vol.42(4), pp.224-235.

[Available at: <http://lis.sagepub.com/content/42/4/224.abstract>], Date Accessed 22<sup>nd</sup> December 2012.

Baxter, P. and Jack, S. (2008) Qualitative Case Study Methodology: Study Design and Implementation for Novice Researchers, *The Qualitative Report*, Vol,13 (4), pp.544-559.

Biddix, J. P., Chung, C. J. and Park, H. W. (2011) Convenience or credibility? A study of college student online research behaviours, *Internet and Higher Education*, Vol. 14, pp.175-182. [Available at:

<http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1096751611000042>], Date Accessed 22<sup>nd</sup> December 2012.

Google (2013a) *About Google Books* [Online] [Available at:

<http://books.google.com/intl/EN/googlebooks/about.html>], Date Accessed 22<sup>nd</sup> December 2012.

Google (2013b) *Google Scholar* [Online] [Available at:

<http://scholar.google.co.uk/intl/en/scholar/about.html>], Date Accessed 22<sup>nd</sup> December 2012.

Ismail, L. (2010) What net generation students really want: determining library help-seeking preferences of undergraduates, *Reference Services Review*, Vol. 38 (1), pp. 10-27. [Available at:

<http://www.emeraldinsight.com/journals.htm?articleid=1839173>], Date Accessed 22<sup>nd</sup> December 2012.

QSR International (2013) *NVivo*, [Available at: [http://www.qsrinternational.com/products\\_nvivo.aspx](http://www.qsrinternational.com/products_nvivo.aspx)], Date Accessed 22<sup>nd</sup> December 2012.

Rickman, K. and Budrovich, L. (2010) Surprises revealed in a student questionnaire at Curtin University Library, *Incite* Vol. 31(6), 26. [Available at: <http://search.informit.com.au/browsePublication;py=2010;vol=31;res=IELHSS;issn=0158-0876;iss=6>] Date Accessed 22<sup>nd</sup> December 2012.

Sadeh, T. (2008) User experience in the library: a case study. [Online] Author's copy of paper submitted to *New Library World*, Vol.109 (1/2). [Available at: <http://www.exlibrisgroup.com/files/Publications/Userexperienceinthelibraryacasestudy.pdf>], Date Accessed 22<sup>nd</sup> December 2012.

Stake, R. (1995) *The Art of Case Study Research*, Thousand Oaks, California: Sage.

Srivastava, P. and Hopwood, N. (2009) A Practical Iterative Framework for Qualitative Data Analysis, *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, Vol. 8(1), pp.76-84.

Thomas, D. (2006) A General Inductive Approach for Analyzing Qualitative Evaluation Data, *American Journal of Evaluation*, Vol. 27(2), pp.237-246.

University of Worcester (2013) *Summon* [Online] [Available at: <http://summon.worc.ac.uk/>], Date Accessed 22<sup>nd</sup> December 2012.

## **Biographies:**

**Carly Sharples** has worked in libraries since 2008 and has been in an Academic Liaison role since 2011, first at the University of Worcester, and currently as Social Sciences Faculty Librarian at the University of East Anglia. Her teaching interests centre on Information Skills within the context of the

student experience and their learning needs. She has research interests focusing on Information Literacy, use of technology in Libraries and embedding information skills teaching in the FE/HE sector as a whole.

**Nick Breeze** is currently the Learning and Teaching Research Projects Officer in the Institute of Sport and Exercise Science at the University of Worcester, where he supports academic colleagues with research projects. His previous roles have included Teaching Fellow in Education at the University of Bristol, secondary music teacher, composer, performer and conductor. His research interests focus on learning and teaching in Higher Education, the use of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) in Education and Multimodal Research Methods.