

Scholarly reading habits: demonstrating library value

Carol Tenopir and Rachel Volentine explore what academics' reading habits can tell us about the value of a library's electronic collections.

It seems an obvious statement to make: scholarly reading is at the heart of much of what happens in a university, from research to teaching. But is it possible to measure the level of scholarly reading taking place? And, in measuring it, can we help to demonstrate the value of the library to the activities of scholars and students? A study undertaken by the University of Tennessee for the UK's JISC Collections suggests that this might be possible.

Measuring the value and return on investment of the academic library and its collections has become more important as budgets are strained, costs of materials and services increase, and libraries rethink their services and collections. Many assessments of library value focus on usage. However, assessing the value of collections should include not only a simple measure of usage, but also consider how access to these materials impacts the research, teaching, and other core activities of university academic staff. A new report, *Scholarly Reading and the Value of Library Resources*, analyses the article, book, and other publication reading patterns of UK academic staff, measures how these readings shape and influence their work, and looks at the relative use of library-provided material. Six UK universities participated in the project, which was funded by JISC Collections in partnership with the University of Tennessee's Center for Information and Communication Studies.

What academics read – and why

Academics read a variety of scholarly materials every month: we found that, on average, they read 22 articles, seven books, and ten other publications. If we multiple the average number of readings by the average time spent per reading, we found that academics spent nearly five eight-hour work days each month dedicated to scholarly reading. What's more, the library plays an especially important role: we found that two-thirds of article readings came from the library collection, mostly the electronic collection. Interestingly, books are more often purchased or received from the publisher, except in the case of academics

under 30 who rely more on their libraries for books. Unlike articles, scholarly books are most likely to be in print form, rather than electronic. Other publications (such as conference proceedings, government documents, or magazine articles) are more frequently obtained as either a free copy from a publisher or from a website.

Library collections particularly support the research and teaching missions of the university. Scholarly readings improve academics' results, change/broaden/narrow their focus, and inspire new thinking. Our study revealed that research is the most frequent purpose of reading, whether article, book, or other publication. 67% of articles obtained, 52% of books and 40% of other publications were for research. Teaching accounts for around 12% of articles read and 28% of books read, whereas other publications are used more for keeping up to date (28%).

Academics demonstrate the value that scholarly materials bring to them by investing their time in reading. Value is also shown by the high-quality results academics receive from their investment. Almost all comments echoed this positive theme. As one respondent comments: 'Scholarly articles play an absolutely vital and fundamental role in my teaching and research. Neither activity would be possible or plausible without them'. Another states that scholarly publications are 'absolutely crucial and it would be impossible to imagine scholarly life without them'. Words like 'crucial' and 'essential' were commonplace.

New ways in – social media

In addition to traditional scholarly material, academics are also interacting with social media. Nearly half of the respondents participated at least occasionally in one or more of the social media tools we examined (Twitter, blogs, podcasts, online videos, and user comments in online articles). Participation is more frequent than creation, though, with only a quarter of the respondents reporting that they create content using social media tools. High-frequency users or creators of

social media are more likely to be aged 50 or younger and to read more scholarly materials than others; social media use is thus closely linked to research activity. Social media are not replacing traditional scholarly resources for research and teaching, but are enhancing their use.

Getting there fast

As mentioned above, nearly two-thirds of article readings in the universities surveyed are obtained from the library; over 90% of these are from the electronic collections. The second most frequent source of articles is a website or free online journal (Figure 1). Academics not only use the library's collections to obtain articles, they also use the library's search tools to become aware of relevant items. One respondent explained: 'It is important to get an article almost immediately through an online subscription. There is far too much information out there and very little time to screen through and read articles. I find that there is less chance of reading an article when there is a delay between the time of finding the article and getting hold of it'. Library services which allow for a seamless transition from finding a relevant article to downloading or reading the full-text are the most valuable.

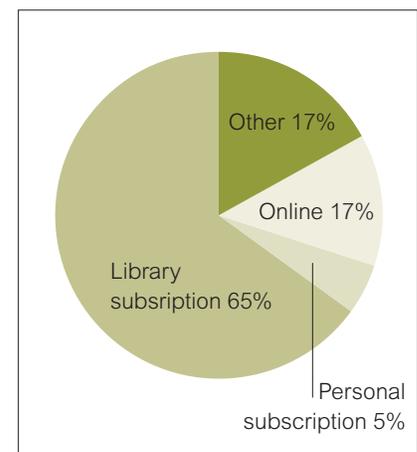


Figure 1: Where academics obtain articles

Academics have limits on their time, and want access to articles in the most convenient and fast manner possible. As one respondent comments: 'Without wide electronic access

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through library subscriptions, many aspects of my work would either take substantially longer or be done to a lower standard'. Another says: 'Subscriptions to electronic journals improve my research and make it faster and easier for me to perform my job effectively'. Not only does it take less time to find and obtain articles from an electronic source, academics can read them wherever it is convenient. Most articles obtained from the library are read from the office or home. Although a majority of readings come from the library virtual collections, only 2% of article readings are actually read in the physical library (Figure 2).

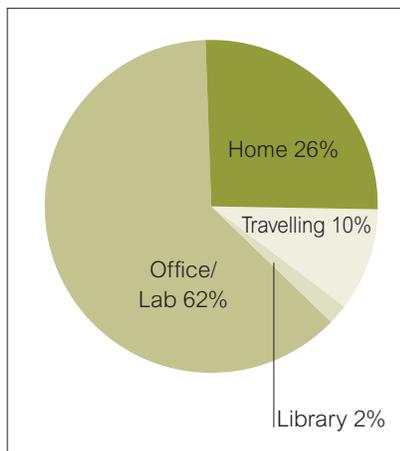


Figure 2: Location of article readings

When it comes to e-collections, diversity is also important. While many article readings are from the first 18 months of publication (46.9%), academics also read older articles, including 11% which are 15 years old or more. Older articles are more likely to be obtained from a library, suggesting that back files, as well as current subscriptions, are a key investment.

What does this tell us?

Academics are drawn to the rapidity and convenience of the library's e-journal collections. While we can only speculate on why academics are not obtaining books from the library, it may be that the convenience and speed of access is not equal to electronic journal collections. E-journal collections allow academics to browse thousands of journal titles and millions of articles. Electronic books

would potentially address some of these issues.

Other publications are easily accessible from online sources, such as government and conference websites. Therefore, academics do not need to seek them out in the library's collections. It may also be that academics do not always realise that their library provides other publications. Additional marketing of these resources may increase their use.

Academic reading habits clearly demonstrate the value of the library collections, especially the e-journal collections. This is shown in the number of things academics read, the amount of time they spend reading, and the outcomes of this reading. The e-resources provided by the library are essential to continuing academic success. Expanding library e-collections, in terms of the type and diversity of material, is crucial to maintaining the importance and value of libraries in the future.

Academics currently turn to library collections for scholarly articles because it is a convenient and diverse resource. As more content becomes available freely online, however, the library may face competition. As we have already seen with book and other publication readings, there are popular alternatives to the library. But the library's current success may hold the key to expanding its collections of other scholarly materials. By understanding why and where academics turn for scholarly material, the library can focus its goals for the present and the future. The value of scholarly reading will not diminish with time, but the role of the library remains uncertain unless it continues to meet the needs of its users. **L**

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The report, *UK Scholarly Reading and the Value of Library Resources*, is available at www.jisc-collections.ac.uk/news/UK-scholarly-reading

When economic circumstances are challenging, university administrators often talk more frequently about needing to do more with less, productivity dividends, continuous improvement, and operational efficiency and effectiveness. In the case of publicly funded institutions, there may also be talk about improving the stewardship and accountability of public funds.

Something else that is often mentioned as a means of achieving similar outcomes with fewer resources (or, at least, the same level of resources) is process improvement or enhancement. That is, through deliberate and systematic review, actions can be taken to identify, analyse, and improve existing business processes to deliver more efficient ways of working, improved quality, and/or reduced costs.

This has relevance to library leaders because so much of the operating cost of an academic library is tied up in the salary and benefits paid to library employees. At the University of Saskatchewan, for example, approximately 96% of our library operating grant goes to pay employee salaries and benefits.

Over the last year, the university has run an institution-wide Service and Process Enhancement Project (SPEP), which has involved an assessment of the university's administrative functions for improvements in quality and efficiency.

Within the library, we also turned our attention to learning more about process improvement methodologies. An investigative team reviewed the literature to help us all get a better understanding of the concept and methodologies, and presented their findings to library employees. Their work was impressive.

The team's investigations found there are a range of methodologies available. Many are directly relevant and transferrable to academic library contexts. For example: Kaizen, Six Sigma, Lean and Customer-Inspired. Our team then practiced some of the key steps from these methodologies on a process we currently have in place to report and resolve e-access problems reported by library users.

The results of our local experience included an improved understanding about methodologies, an opportunity for some shared action learning by a team of staff, and a realisation that methodologies developed outside of higher education can be both applicable and appropriate within an academic library setting. **L**

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