

# Reading lists - How do you eat yours?

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## Background and rationale

Students at the University of Wolverhampton Business School (UWBS) are given reading lists as part of their guides for each module. Learning Centre Staff at Compton and Telford campuses use the reading lists as the basis for a large proportion of stock purchase decisions. However, there is little or no evidence to suggest how students utilise reading lists when making book selections. Reading lists are a key tool in encouraging students to use library and Learning Centre resources (Smith, 1993). Anecdotal evidence from enquiry desks suggests that students use reading lists to select resources in fairly rigid ways, choosing either the designated key text, or working through the list in a linear fashion. Stubley (2002) states that well-organised reading lists are a key tool to “support, encourage, enthuse and develop students’ understanding and appreciation of a subject”, whereas “less well organised [lists] can be a source of confusion and frustration”. Existing research on reading lists focuses on the operational issues of providing access to them (Smith, 1993), or on the use of reading lists as collection development tools (Stopforth, 1994), rather than examining their use from a student perspective. This research was designed to examine student use of reading lists, concentrating on students within the University of Wolverhampton Business School (UWBS), over levels 1 to 4 on two campuses (Compton and Telford).

## The research

The purpose of the project was to examine how students use reading lists to inform their information resource selections. The research was mainly conducted by means of a questionnaire delivered to UWBS students at levels 1 to 4 during class time. This method of delivery ensured a 100% response rate. The 286 completed questionnaires returned account for around 10% of UWBS students. This was augmented by a citation analysis of 385 bibliographies from assignments of some of the students questioned.

The questionnaire dealt with three main areas of research. Section one dealt with how the students used reading lists, including: whether they used reading lists to select resources; which types of resources they would select; how useful they found reading lists and book purchase decisions. The second section was concerned with student preferences regarding the length and format of reading lists. The third section looked at how students used their books and journal articles, concentrating on the number of books and articles used in a typical assignment, and whether a lecturer recommendation would influence the decision to use a resource. An additional section of the questionnaire was constructed to evaluate student awareness and perceptions of the Reading List function on the Learning Centres’ OPAC (Online Public Access Catalogue). This function allows users to access module reading lists online, with direct links to the catalogue record for each reading list item, enabling quicker searching and location of resources.

To augment the questionnaire research, the project also utilised a citation analysis technique. This involved the comparison of anonymised bibliographies from assignments completed for selected UWBS modules with the reading list for the particular module. These were chosen from the modules whose students had previously completed the questionnaire.

The analysis concentrated on several main points: had the student referenced the core or essential text; how many items were listed; were the background or supplementary texts referenced; what was the split between books, journal articles and electronic resources. There was also an evaluation of the individual student's ability to use the Harvard Referencing system (the required referencing system for UWBS).

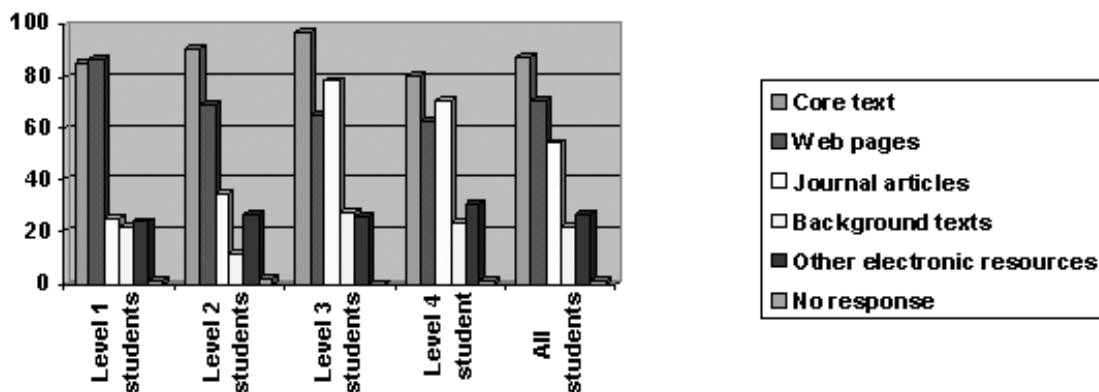
## The outcomes

Results from the research have been both expected and surprising. The following results are mostly taken from the questionnaire responses: any results from the citation analysis are labelled as such.

**Use of reading lists.** As expected, the majority of respondents (91.26%) use reading lists to select resources for a module. For undergraduates, over 91% gave a positive response, falling to 86.81% for postgraduates.

**Choice of resources.** When asked what type of resources they usually use from a reading list (not restricted to one choice), the most popular choice was the core/essential text (see Figure 1). The inclination to use the core text increased through levels 1 to 3, but then dropped to 80.22% for postgraduates. However, citation analysis results indicated that a much lower figure (66.5%) of the bibliographies examined included the core text (see figure 2). The figure was lower than the questionnaire findings throughout levels 1 to 3, although it rose through the levels and by level 4 it was slightly higher, at 86.36% (compared to 80.22% response from the questionnaire). Availability of the core text in the Learning Centres may be a key factor to this result. Although core texts for undergraduate modules are placed in short loan collections and are provided at a ratio of 1 book per 8 students, the demand for the texts is high. In comparison, many of the postgraduate students have the

**Figure 1 Type of resources used from a reading list- questionnaire response percentages**

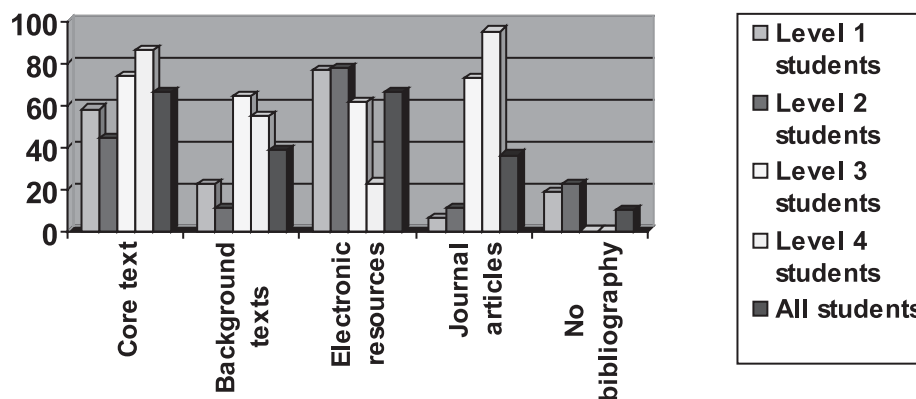


core text provided as part of their course fees.

The next most popular choice overall from the questionnaire was websites, followed by journal articles, other electronic resources and background/supplementary texts. A comparison with the citation analysis again revealed discrepancies, with just under 39% of all bibliographies examined including a background text. Once again, the figure rose by levels 3 and 4 with 64.08% of level 3 and 54.55% of level 4 students citing at least one background text. Over half of the bibliographies examined cited no journal articles, which is in line with the 45.8% of questionnaire respondents who purported not to select journal articles from their reading lists. Another interesting result from the questionnaire is that background/ supplementary texts scored lowest overall and were last for levels 1, 2 and 4 and next to last for level 3. Core/essential texts were the top choice from the questionnaire

for levels 2 to 4, although interestingly, level 1 students preferred web sites to core texts. This was backed up by the citation analysis, with over three quarters of level 1 bibliographies containing one or more electronic information sources. The result was reversed at level 4, with over three quarters of bibliographies at this level citing no electronic resources at all.

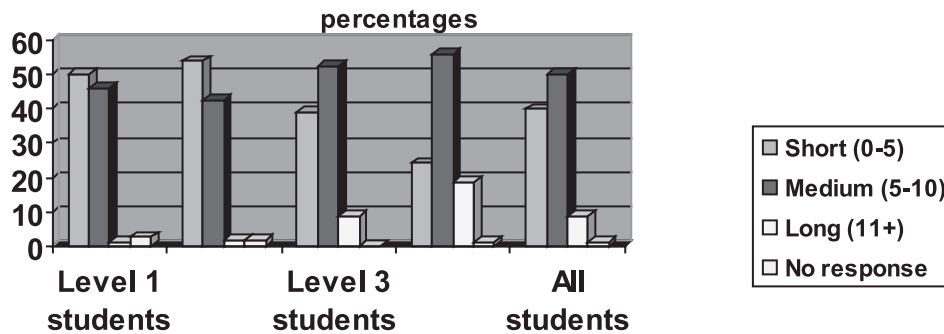
**Figure 2 Type of resources cited in bibliographies- citation analysis percentages**



**Usefulness rating.** Asked to rate how useful they find reading lists when selecting texts or articles (with a scale from 1 = very useful to 5 = not at all useful), overall over half (54.89%) rated reading lists 1 or 2, with a further 34.27% rating 3 (altogether 89.16% rating 1, 2 or 3). Reasons for a positive rating ranged from a desire for direction and a need to ensure relevance in their information selections to issues of time management and comprehensiveness. Just under 7% of the respondents were using the lists as a starting point for their own research. Only around 10% (10.14%) rated usefulness at the lower 4 or 5 rating. Of the 91.26% who indicated that they used reading lists to select items, 57.86% rated reading lists 1 or 2 for usefulness, with a further 32.57% rating them 3 (90.43% rating 1, 2 or 3).

**Book purchase.** 67.13% overall answered yes to the question: do you purchase books for modules? The percentage was higher for level 1 (89.19%), but still over 78% for all levels between 1 and 3. Level 4 students were less enthusiastic purchasers with 31.87% saying they purchased books for modules. However, this may be due to the current UWBS policy of providing core texts as part of course fees for some postgraduate awards. Of those indicating that they bought books, 89.02% bought only the core, or the core and other texts.

**Preferred reading list length.** Length options offered in the questionnaire were: Short (1-4 items); Medium (5-10 items); Long (11+ items). The overall preference was for the medium length (50%) with short length coming in second at 39.86% (see figure 3). There was a definite progression through the levels, with levels 1 and 2 both preferring short length reading lists. By level 3 the preference was for a medium length reading list, and this continued onto level 4. Although long lists gained only 8.74% of the vote overall, their popularity increased with the higher levels of study. Interestingly, the longest bibliography came from a level 4 student, with 53 items cited.

**Figure 3 Preferred length of reading list – questionnaire response**

**Preferred reading list format.** No clear conclusions can be drawn in this section, therefore no recommendations can be made to academic staff regarding students' preferred reading list format. Overall, three of the six suggested formats gained a similar percentage of the responses:

- a list divided into key reading/titles for specific weeks- 22.38%
- a list divided into specific topics/subject areas- 26.57%
- a single core text with background/supplementary reading (the current UWBS agreed format)- 22.73%

Students choosing these three options were often concerned with clarity, relevance and time management issues, with the need for focus and direction being a prime concern. Often the respondent wanted a clear link with the module, assignment or curriculum.

The least popular option was an A-Z reading list (13.29%), preceded by a work pack tailored to the module (15.73%), and a list ranked by the module leader in order of preference (17.48%). The current UWBS format of a core text with background reading was preferred by level 1 and level 3 students, with level 2 students ranking it second after a list divided into topics or subject areas. This option of a list divided into topics or subject areas was also the top choice for level 4 students.

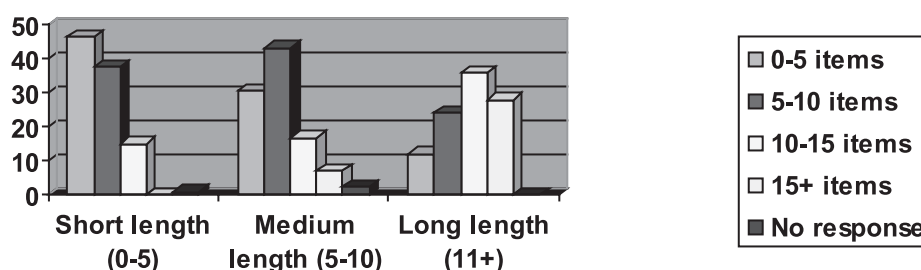
**Number of items used in assignments.** Options given in the questionnaire for the number of books or journal articles used in a typical assignment was: 0-5; 5-10; 10-15; 15+. 74.82% of the students questioned responded that they would use between 0 and 10 books and journal articles in a typical assignment. 0-5 had 36.01% of the responses, with 5-10 picking up 38.81%. There was an increase over the levels of study, as would be expected:

- Level 1 students preferred 0-5 items (64.86%) with no takers at all for 10-15 items or 15+ items
- Level 2 students also preferred 0-5 books or journal articles (36.46%), but had some students opting for 5-10 (28.85%) and a small number going for 10-15 items (7.69%)
- At level 3 almost half of the respondents chose 5-10 journal articles or books (47.83%), with 10-15 items coming in second and 4.35% opting for 15+ items
- 5-10 books or articles came highest with 43.96% of level 4 students, but almost as many said that they used 10+ (43.97%)

The findings of an expected increase in the number of items used for an assignment over the levels of study are confirmed when compared with the results from question 3a- which asked about the preferred length of reading list (see figure 4). Students choosing a short preferred reading list length (1-4 items), also professed to using fewer books in a typical assignment. Students preferring a medium length list also tended to use 5-10 items in a typical assignment. There is also a clear link with the citation analysis. Overall the average

number of cited items in the bibliographies analysed was 8, however for levels 1 and 2, the average number was 5, moving up to 11 at level 3 and 16 at level 4.

**Figure 4 Link between preferred reading list length and the number of items used in a typical assignment- questionnaire response percentages**



**Percentage of items on a reading list used for assignment.** Tackling the idea of the amount of books or journal articles used for a typical assignment from a different perspective, we also asked students to estimate the percentage of items on a reading list that they would try to use in an assignment. Choices were: All; 90%; 75%; 50%; 25%; 0. Overall the highest response was for 75%, with 102 responses- 35.66%. 50% was the next highest with 27.62% of the total response. 3 out of the 4 levels had 75% as their top response, with level 2 opting for 50%.

**Lecturer's recommendation.** A very definite result was the level of influence exerted by a lecturer's recommendation of a book or journal article during a lecture. Almost 84% of the respondents agreed that if a lecturer recommended a book or journal article they would probably or definitely be inclined to use it. The trend was the same across all levels.

**Awareness of the reading list (Talislist) function on OPAC.** The final section of the questionnaire looked at awareness of the reading list function available on the Learning Centre's online catalogue (OPAC). Awareness of the Talislist function was good with less than 20% (19.93%) ticking the Not Aware box. 55% of the students said that they used the function.

**Usefulness of OPAC reading list function (Talislist).** Of the 55% of responses who indicated use of the Talislist system 62.42% rated it 1 or 2 for usefulness on a scale of 1 to 5 (1= very useful, 5= not at all useful), with a further 24.84% rating it 3.

**Harvard referencing.** Referencing standards were somewhat disappointing. Overall almost 10% of the assignments analysed - all of which were level 1 or level 2 - had no bibliography. 21.29% contained a bibliography which was not in a recognisable Harvard format. The remaining bibliographies were recognisable as Harvard; however, only 15.84% were totally correctly presented. On a positive note, the quality of referencing increased with the levels of study. At level 1, 5.29% were in a good Harvard format, by level 3 the percentage was 28.16, and at level 4, 36.36% of bibliographies were correctly referenced.

## Benefits

The project has reinforced our belief in the importance of reading lists to students: a fact which has long been assumed, but now has been proven. Given the time and work put into reading lists by Learning Resources and academic staff, this is a very positive outcome. The citation analysis also showed that students do consult reading lists when selecting information resources to complete assignments. Students attached more importance to

reading lists and used them more as the level of study increased, which suggests that students are more concerned with the quality and accuracy of information resources as they progress through the levels of study.

The research has also highlighted some areas for improvement, particularly in the quality of referencing and students' recognition of the importance of referencing. Questions have also been raised around the types of resources (electronic, journal articles etc.) selected by students, particularly at level 1 and 2, and whether students recognise the need to select quality information resources rather than the most accessible ones.

Dissemination of the research to UWBS and Learning Resources staff has already begun, and the findings of the project will hopefully be used to improve future reading list production. The findings will also be fed into future purchasing decisions for Learning Centre stock, for example, the perceived and actual importance of core and essential texts to students as opposed to the importance of background texts supports our current policy of purchasing fewer copies of background texts, and including copies of undergraduate core texts in short loan collections.

## Future developments

The research highlighted a need for improved user education, concentrating on the importance of referencing as well as the mechanics of how to reference precisely. The intention is to incorporate this into an embedding project initially to produce effective user education literature and to improve staff and student awareness of the issues surrounding referencing in general and Harvard referencing in particular.

The questionnaire findings regarding the OPAC reading list function will be used to improve the future production and circulation of guides and user education literature, in order to target students as early in their university career as possible.

## References

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