University Students Consultative Forum

Consultation on a vision and strategy for Library Services
13–27 October 2015: Summary

The complete record of the discussion can be viewed on the forum.

Note: There were 334 posts by students and 71 ratings. 49 students made at least 1 post.
Question 1: Please can you describe how you have used library services and resources during your studies with The Open University?

- Students shared a range of ways in which they had used the online Library. Usage tends to increase through the different levels and varies by discipline, with some modules still pretty self-contained in that they don't require much Library use.
- Some students felt the OU does prepare students for researching their own topic whereas others felt that modules they had studied did not do this, and that sometimes research outside of the module materials was actively discouraged.
- Many students find the size of the Library daunting with the website described as 'baffling', 'confusing' and 'not very user-friendly', and many it challenging to sift through such large amounts of information.
- Some students had accessed Library online training, either live, via the recordings, or through activities signposted from module websites and these were generally thought to be helpful. Skills materials and activities were most beneficial when integrated into teaching in a meaningful way but activities should not be compulsory for those already familiar with the Library. Standalone activities were also useful for gaps between modules. It was suggested that an introduction to the Library before study at any level would be useful and that a simple guide to using the Library website should be available.
- The search facility is liked by some but not by others and reasons were explored in detail. Several students use Google Scholar with the option to link through to OU journals.
- Specific resources mentioned as useful included Web of Science, Browzine, OED and various other databases.
- Refworks and other reference management tools get some mentions. Refworks (which the Library will not be subscribing to after March 2016) had mixed reviews.
- In summary, the Library is a well-regarded resource which adds value to many students’ studies, but it takes practice and perseverance to get to grips with it.
- The Library also provides an enjoyable distraction from study at times and is used for general interest, work or research outside of studies e.g. about health conditions.
Question 2: If you have not used library services and resources during your studies could you explain why not? What were the challenges? 

Most students had used the library services and resources but reasons for not doing so included:

- The study material is sufficient, on undergraduate modules at least.
- Lack of time.
- The Library is too big / distracting / daunting / complicated.
- Relevant material could be found by using a search engine / Google Scholar.
- It wasn't introduced in the module materials.
- Searching the Library is not intuitive.

Similar issues around the search facility arose as in the thread on question one.

I found the study material sufficient to develop my understanding and complete the assignments.

Google and Google Scholar are quick, easily understood and user-friendly.

The search engines are a bit baffling and it is frustrating that I often cannot find full texts.
Question 3: How has having access to the OU Library benefitted you in terms of helping you with your studies (for example finding information for your assignment, getting help when you needed it)?

Having access to the OU Library has enabled students to:

- Access journal and other resources to do background reading for research.
- Follow up references, get more background on a topic, and do wider reading.
- Improve assignments leading to better marks and a deeper understanding of a topic.
- Carry out literature reviews, which in some cases are relevant to work.
- Improve knowledge of current research.
- Access valued resources such as the OED.
- Make use of the live chat facility, which is especially useful when it's the OU librarians at the other end and can save time in accessing a resource (or not).
- Access materials (e.g. set books) when they're too expensive to buy.
- Engage in intellectual self-development.
- And more!

The Library has been essential at Masters level and also for a significant number of undergraduate modules, and embedding Library use into modules is helpful. Library tutorials help to make sense of what's on offer and some students also found the information navigation skills they had gained a useful addition to their skill set.

I think it is an essential part of university study. One of the core building blocks.

It helped me by being readily available at 2 am when I was struggling to finish a TMA rather than my local library which closed at 5pm.

It has improved a number of assignments leading to better TMA results.

Embedding library use into modules is helpful, especially early on.

I consider the OU library to be tremendous for intellectual self-development.
Question 4: Have you had any particular difficulties accessing library services and resources that you would like the OU to overcome?

- Some students reported that they had not had any difficulties.
- The main issue raised here was that searching for resources can be challenging due to the large number of results produced, many of which were not helpful, some of which were not accessible.
- Navigation is a problem for many students who have to click through lots of pages to find what they’re looking for and may find it difficult to recover items they have previously accessed.
- The library chat service is perceived to be useful, especially to resolve search and navigation issues.
- It would help if it were more clearly signposted when you move outside the Library website and there is an issue with knowing what login and password is required.
- As mentioned in other threads, Library training can be usefully embedded into modules but this needs to be flexible in order to meet different students’ prior knowledge.
- Other issues mentioned include:
  - download speeds.
  - lack of breadcrumb trails/navigation panel.
  - website automatically showing mobile view on ipads.
  - pictures fill up screen space.
  - contact/help and support information should be at the top of the page not the bottom.
  - more dropdown menus would be welcome.
  - referencing software (also covered elsewhere).
  - a direct link to library resources required for a module from the module homepage would be helpful.

Navigation can be tricky, clicking link after link to find what you need.
There are so many ways of searching and criteria to search under I find it difficult to know when to start.
I have had no difficulties at all but then the use I have made of the resources has been quite limited.
Question 5: What could the OU Library do in the future that would help you succeed in your studies?

- Different views were expressed about how much signposting there should be with regard to sources required for modules. Some thought a list with links would be helpful, others thought this was ‘spoon-feeding’ and students needed to learn the skills to find the sources themselves. Similarly, some students would like library resources, particularly search, to be simpler whereas others thought the focus should be on the skills to access what’s there and that learning to manage the complexity was necessary.

- There was a similar discussion to that elsewhere in the consultation about the integration of Library skills into modules. Overall this was helpful if done well.

- Other ideas:
  - give more prominence to databases such as the web of science.
  - make it easy to filter searches by subject area.
  - making more ebooks available.
  - make OU module material available. This would enable those registered to get a head start on the course and facilitate decision-making about future modules.
  - subscribe to more botanical journals.
  - make it possible to use more sorting options simultaneously on search results.
  - have written instructions available as well as video tutorials.
  - provide a virtual bookshelf of selected books for each module.
  - integrate of google books in the same way as google scholar.
  - provide a video explaining what the Library has to offer (as well as how to access it).
  - timetable optional ‘using the library’ activities into the study planner of every level 2 and 3 module. (Ideally in the first week).
  - add a link to ‘advanced search’ direct from the home page.
  - enable filtering by ‘peer reviewed’ and ‘full text available.’
  - continue to have the most up to date and relevant information and resources.
  - Provide an opt-in ‘hints’ email alert and online presentations on advanced topics.

I would have liked to have seen more encouragement to use the library at an earlier stage - maybe not at level 1 but certainly so at level 2.

The defining factor of libraries in the future will be helping you find the needle in the haystack as efficiently as possible.

I have experienced some great library induction tutorials that have really helped me develop my skills.
Question 6: Is there anything else you would like to say about the OU Library?

• The main new issue raised here was about alumni access. Many students would be willing to pay a modest fee for ongoing access to the OU Library’s resources (around £10-15 per month or £200 a year were mentioned) and would welcome the opportunity. However, it was pointed out that the cost of providing this may be more than people are willing to pay so it may not be viable financially. This point was responded to on the forum.

Other issues:
• Sometimes there is a problem accessing the most recent journal literature.
• Students valued having physical access to module materials when choosing new courses e.g. at the physical OU Library in Milton Keynes and in regional centres. It would be good if this could be replicated online.
• A specific problem was raised with L161 which was followed up immediately.
• Suggestion for a ‘Library Champions’ network of students and ALs to promote the library services (enthusiastically) where there are opportunities to do so.

I might grumble sometimes but I wouldn’t be without it!

Offering access to alumni for a moderate fee would make lots of people very happy!

Summary

Several issues were raised across the consultation threads that emerged as key themes. These are:
• Although some students haven’t used the Library extensively, students welcome the wide-ranging access to resources it provides.
• Many students find it very difficult to navigate the huge range of resources available. While students welcome the help and support available, in particular the online tutorials and online chat, there is a feeling that the interface and search facility could be improved and a number of suggestions were made about this.
• There are differing views about the balance between making resources easy to find and teaching students the necessary skills to navigate such a wide range of resources.
• Integration of Library Skills in modules is welcome but again there are differing views as to how best this is done.
Next steps

- Library Services are conducting an aspirational vision and strategy appraisal exercise between September and December 2015, working with a small team of external colleagues to look at the development priorities for Library Services over the next 5-10 years. A number of activities are being conducted during this process including self-evaluation and consultations with key stakeholders. A review panel consisting of external colleagues and a student representative appointed by OUSA will be looking at the findings and making recommendations on the future focus areas and priorities for Library Services.

- All comments from this consultation will be analysed and summarised for the review panel in a student consultation report. This report will be used by the review panel along with other consultation feedback to inform the future focus areas and priorities for Library Services.

- Queries and concerns will also be analysed to identify quick wins and longer term gains. Library Services will look to implement quick wins swiftly. For longer term gains recommendations will be incorporated into our unit planning exercise. Should a recommendation not be taken forward, for example in the case of legal or technological barriers, details of the issue will be fed back to the participants.

- A response to the quick wins and long term gains will be fed back by the end of this year.

- The student consultation report will be part of the pre-reading for the panel which is scheduled to be submitted by the week beginning 23 November. The review panel will convened in the week beginning 14 December. The panel will submit their recommendations at the end of March 2016 and we will update the consultation forum again after this point.