

Digital Information Seekers

How academic libraries can support the use of digital resources

Briefing paper

March 2010

This briefing paper highlights the findings of a JISC-funded report on the behaviours of 'digital information seekers', namely students, researchers, academics or anyone else using digital resources in academic libraries.

The Digital Information Seeker: Report of the Findings from Selected OCLC, RIN and JISC User Behaviour Projects reviewed twelve major studies within the UK and the USA from the last five years, looking at the changing information needs of library users and exploring how libraries can support the use of digital resources. These studies covered a wide range of areas including:

- the perception of libraries and information resources
- users' behaviours and needs
- services where library users can contact a virtual reference desk to ask questions
- online catalogues
- the use, value and impact of e-journals and e-books

Digital information-seeking behaviour: the findings of the studies

Students, researchers and academics are generally confident in their own ability to use information discovery tools. However, as information literacy has not kept pace with digital literacy levels, there is an identifiable need for training, support and improved systems to help people find the information they need.

Search engines are seen as fundamental; they are often the primary resource to begin an information search and searching for information using keywords is increasingly becoming the dominant search behaviour. Information seekers are aware of the difference between

'formal' research literature and basic internet content. Some students have indicated that they prefer using library catalogues over search engines when writing assignments.

E-journals are increasingly important to the research process and the majority of professional researchers have embraced digital content. Immediate access to information from their own desktop computer is almost taken for granted and gaining access to the full-text journal article is seen as more of an issue than discovering the information sources. The growing availability of online services in the past five years has impacted the number of researchers who physically visit the library regularly.

There is evidence that once digital resources have been found, they are then used to 'power browse' for information. Power browsing is when a student or researcher selects just a few pages from an e-book or an e-journal to pick out the relevant information. Information seekers (undergraduate and graduate students as well as professors) prefer speedy access to a section of information and tend to spend very little time using content.

Information seekers do not completely rely upon search engines but will also use their own personal networks to find the information they need. These networks vary: academics are more likely to turn to co-workers, colleagues and other professionals, whereas students will turn to other students, classmates, family or friends for information.

In contrast to academic library users, younger non-academic users tend to be much less competent in searching and evaluating results than they think, and use libraries and all types of electronic resources much less.

What do digital information seekers want from academic libraries?

Though disciplinary differences exist, speed and convenience are always important to library users, who appreciate how useful electronic access to resources is compared to going to a physical library. Information seekers want access to more digital content of all kinds and formats.

Information seekers are beginning to require enhanced functionality in library systems. The entire process of information seeking needs to be supported by information systems, including increased access to resources such as full-text journal articles. Information seekers also want access to more enhanced content such as subject information, summaries, abstracts and tables of contents to assist them in evaluating resources.

How academic libraries can meet the needs of their users

Users' perceptions of library services have been slow to change and many people still tend to think of libraries as collections of books rather than providers of electronic resources. Academic libraries serve many constituencies with different needs and behaviours, such as academic discipline, research experience, demographic category and information-seeking context. Libraries need to understand those needs and adapt to meet them in a flexible manner.

- Library systems must do better at providing **seamless access to resources** such as full-text e-journals, online foreign-language materials, e-books, a variety of electronic publishers' platforms and virtual reference desk services
- Library catalogues need to include more direct links to resources and more online content
- Libraries should provide more **digital resources** of all kinds, from e-journals to curated data sets, as well as emerging services such as virtual research environments (VREs), open source materials, non-text-based and multimedia objects, and blogs

- Library systems must be prepared for **changing user behaviours**, which include advanced search options, demands for immediate access and quick perusal of resources
- Library systems need to look and function more like **search engines** (eg Google) and **popular web services** (eg Amazon.com), as these are familiar to users who are comfortable and confident in using them
- **High-quality metadata** is becoming more important for discovery of appropriate resources
- Librarians must now consider the implications of **power browsing behaviours**
- Students need more **guidance** and clarity on how to find content and how to assess its worth as well as its relevance
- The library must **advertise** its brand and its resources better to academics, researchers and students, demonstrating its value clearly and unambiguously

Further research addressing academic library users is still needed and the report suggests that there is a need for a wide-ranging user behaviour study to address how academic library users find information in different contexts and situations.

This briefing paper is based on the findings of a study The Digital Information Seeker: Report of the Findings from Selected OCLC, RIN and JISC User Behaviour Projects, which was researched and written for JISC by Lynn Silipigni Connaway and Timothy J. Dickey of OCLC Research:

www.jisc.ac.uk/publications/reports/2010/digitalinformationseeker

Alternative formats of this briefing paper can be found at: www.jisc.ac.uk/publications

Further Information

JISC Resource Discovery Programme:
www.jisc.ac.uk/whatwedo/programmes/resourcediscovery

JISC Libraries of the Future Campaign:
www.jisc.ac.uk/whatwedo/campaigns/librariesofthefuture

OCLC (Online Computer Library Centre)
www.oclc.org

RIN (Research Information Network)
www.rin.ac.uk