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Citation

Killick, Selena (2023). The Library's Influence and Impact on Learning: A Case Study From The Open University (UK). *Asian Association of Open Universities Journal*, 18(3) pp. 279–291.

URL

<https://oro.open.ac.uk/92436/>

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The library's influence and impact on learning: a case study from The Open University (UK)

Library's
influence and
impact on
learning

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279

Received 4 April 2023
Revised 12 September 2023
Accepted 14 September 2023

Abstract

Purpose – The Open University (OU) in the UK has been providing distance learning since 1969. The purpose of this case study is to outline the impact that The OU Library in the UK has had on student learning outcomes by embedding academic literature and digital and information literacy (DIL) skills materials in the curriculum.

Design/methodology/approach – The case study presents an overview of the university context, including how the curriculum is developed. It discusses the role of the library in this process, outlining how librarians work with academic staff to embed skills and literature in the curriculum. Unique in-house technical solutions are presented to aid future approaches to providing distance library services.

Findings – The impact of the library on university education is discussed. Findings from qualitative research are presented, outlining the value the university places on the role of the library as an educational partner. Quantitative research studies are also presented, outlining the positive relationships between library content access and training attendance with student success.

Practical implications – As universities are considering their distance-learning offerings post-COVID-19, it is hoped that this case study will help both library and university administrators examine the role of their libraries in this strategy.

Originality/value – A case study on the approach The OU Library takes to support education in its broadest sense has not been published before.

Keywords Distance libraries, Online learning, Student success

Paper type Case study

Introduction

The Open University (OU) in the UK has pioneered distance learning at scale since 1969. It remains the UK's largest academic institution with over 150,000 students (HESA, 2023). This case study explores in detail how the university library helps students achieve their learning goals and the role of the library as a distance education provider. The case study discusses the institutional context of The OU in the UK from its formation, and how the OU Library went from a print-based physical entity supporting academic staff to an online library supporting the whole OU community. A discussion of the academic curriculum development process is presented, with additional focus on how the library supports this process through the integration of academic literature and digital and information literacy (DIL) skills materials into the curriculum. The role of the library in learning is also outlined, including live training delivery and real-time help and support. Finally, a summary of the impact of the

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The author would like to acknowledge the expertise of all of The Open University Library staff, past and present and specifically thank Fiona Durham, Seth Townley, Matthew Taylor and Jo Parker for their input.



library activity on the university is presented, highlighting the relationship between the library and student success. As many universities are considering the role of distance learning in a post-COVID-19 future, it is hoped that this case study from the UK's pioneers in distance learning will inform future education providers on the role of the university library in this landscape.

Introduction to The Open University (UK)

The OU was initially founded to revolutionise educational access to adults in the UK, providing a university education via correspondence, supported in part by television and radio broadcasts at a national scale, and it sought to open up the possibility of a university degree on a part-time basis to adults who had missed out the first time around (Perry, 1976). As technology has progressed, the methods of delivery of education for The OU have understandably evolved into online learning. However, the fundamental mission remains in place: open to people, places, methods and ideas (The Open University, 2023a).

To support this mission, there are no prerequisite qualifications for most of the undergraduate degree courses. Primarily, The OU delivers a range of degree qualifications that are delivered through a modular study approach. Students can select from a range of modules which will either form a specific degree (e.g. BSc (Hons) Psychology) or select modules from across all curriculum areas to gain BA/BSc (Hons) Open. Self-paced teaching materials are accessed via the virtual learning environment – supported by a tutor and regular tutorials – and tutor-marked assignments. The need for The university became apparent as early demand for courses outstripped supply by approximately 2:1 (Perry, 1976). At their peak, prior to higher education funding changes in 2009, student numbers were close to 200,000 (Varghese, 2018). Numbers dropped after student tuition fees were raised in 2009 and have stayed steady at around 120,000 students a year since 2015 but have grown to 150,000 students since the COVID-19 pandemic started in 2020 (HESA, 2023).

Building the OU library

The OU Library, based in Milton Keynes, was established at the inception of the university to provide academic staff with access to the latest research in their field. Unlike most university libraries, which aim to provide access to information for students and staff, the OU Library's initial remit was to support the campus-based staff only. The curriculum was developed by OU academic staff, with copyright-cleared images, graphics and academic publications where appropriate to support the correspondence learning.

In a non-distance university, the physical university library plays a key role for students, offering access to printed literature, study space, essential technologies and support from staff. Within the librarianship sector, much has been written about the value of academic libraries (Town, 2011; Oakleaf, 2010) and about the vital role that information literacy (IL) plays in education and society as a whole (Hepworth, 2000; Corral, 2008). Within a regulatory context, the Dearing report in 1997 established the need for higher education providers to develop students' skills in independent learning (Dearing, 1997). By 2001, the Quality Assurance Agency Framework for Higher Education required students studying in England, Wales and Northern Ireland to develop IL skills (Reedy and Baker, 2011). Today, the framework for higher education in England [1] requires students to have both appropriate access to, and support in using, physical and digital learning resources to succeed in their studies and beyond (Office for Students, 2018).

As electronic publishing and home Internet access grew around the start of the new millennium, the OU Library saw an opportunity to innovate by providing an online distance university library for students. Library collection policies were reviewed and redeveloped to capitalise on the emerging electronic journals and large publisher deals. In the year 2000, the

library collection consisted of modest 200,000 books and a large electronic journal collection of over 5,000 titles (SCONUL, 2002). This has now grown to over 600,000 electronic books and over 130,000 electronic journals (SCONUL, 2022). The first library website was launched in the year 2000, providing students access to electronic journals and databases, help guides and the library enquiry desk for the first time from a distance. Today, the online library attracts half a million unique users and over 10mn page views per year.

When the OU Library began to expand its remit in order to support students, it became immediately apparent that providing online access to databases and journals alone would not be sufficient. How would a student know there was a library available to them if they never walked into a building containing shelves of books? Why would they access the online journals (and later, electronic books) if the course book contained all the information they needed to succeed in their studies? How would they gain the vital lifelong skill of becoming information literate, defined as “able to recognize when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the needed information?” (American Library Association, 1989). To ensure that the value of the library was fully realised, the OU Library embarked on a strategy to embed both the library collections and the skills students needed to use them into the university curriculum.

As a result of the successful senior stakeholder engagement by the library, the role of the library in the education experience had been firmly established. The University’s Learning and Teaching Strategy, published in 2009, provided a unified high-level strategy for all faculties. The strategy identified the key objectives and priorities for learning and teaching across The OU. Approved at the highest levels of university governance, the strategy outlined the need for enhanced use of learning resources (e.g. academic literature provided by the library) and increased IL across the curriculum. The strategic support for both academic literature and skills materials was crucial in gaining traction with faculties on the need for and importance of these services provided by the library for their curriculum design.

Creating the curriculum

The creation of the course curriculum at The OU was initially founded on a print production model (Perry, 1976). Academics would create the course content, supported by a team of production specialists who would translate this into books. Whilst the method of delivery has evolved from print-only to primarily digital, the approach to creating the curriculum is largely unchanged.

The modular study approach is reflected in the production process, with each module being created as its own project and fitted into an overall qualification structure. Once the module for creation has been approved through the typical university-quality assurance governance processes, a module team is formed. This typically includes a core team of academic staff, headed by a module team chair, along with colleagues with specialist professional skills, including a librarian, development editor, learning designers, graphic media designer, interactive media designer and a senior project manager. The collegiate and collaborative process is seen as a key strength in the creation of the curriculum.

The design phase. An initial learning design workshop is held to develop a shared understanding of some key learning design parameters and to create a rough outline of the pedagogical design of the module. The academic team members are then assigned the various sections of the module and start writing, supported by regular module team meetings headed by the module team chair. An early draft in Microsoft Word, shared by the team, provides a structured outline of each week of study, giving a clear indication of what sections and subsections will cover and how the learning outcomes will be met. It is not uncommon for the first draft to be a bullet point outline. Once confirmed, the team then sets about turning the first draft into the final learning content. As part of the second draft, the academic author will

indicate the specialists where they would like to add interactivity, images, skill materials, library content, audio visual materials and other content types, which add to the richness of the curriculum. Once the academic author has finished writing the learning content, the professional specialists review the second draft to identify the content they need to add and make recommendations to the academic author on other opportunities they may also like to explore to strengthen the curriculum. Team members then collaborate on the second draft to get to a final draft that is ready to be passed to the editorial team to produce the content.

The production phase. Once the final draft has been produced by the module team, the team of editors and rich media specialists work to transfer the Word document into Extensible Markup Language (XML) for the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) and printed book when relevant. Initially, a structural edit is performed to ensure that the structure of the learning is pedagogically sound and works efficiently in the final medium. The editor ensures that the document flows logically, that the learning objectives are achieved effectively and that sections are of an appropriate length for the medium. Placeholders for any graphics, images, videos and materials awaiting copyright clearance are placed in the structured content. Once this phase is completed, the module team conducts a final review before approving the module for copy editing. In theory, from this point, the module is locked for editing and no further changes to the content can be made.

The copy editor reviews the module to ensure that the text has no spelling, punctuation or grammar errors, unclear wording, or other inconsistencies. They oversee the final creation of the module, pulling all the assets into their placeholders and ensuring that all figures, tables, boxes, images and so on are appropriately referenced and cross-referenced in the text. They also ensure that all links work accurately and that in-text citations and references meet the university referencing scheme. Once the copy edit is completed, a final proofread is performed. The module team then completes a final sign-off and the module is made live on the VLE and sent to print if it has an accompanying textbook.

The process of creating a curriculum in this way leads to a high-quality learning experience but it is time intensive: on average, modules developed in this way take two to three years to be designed and produced before the first student can enrol. The cost of publishing the academic content means that early decisions about limiting opportunities to edit or modify the curriculum after it has been produced (Perry, 1976) are still held to this day. To be cost viable, a module is expected to support, on average, 10 years of academic study with a midlife review conducted after three to five years. It is virtually impossible to make changes to the module content whilst the module has students actively studying it, and the annual maintenance cycle focusses on minor edits such as assignment hand-in dates.

The library's influence on the curriculum

The OU's vision for providing library service for students at a distance involved integrating academic literature and IL skills into the curriculum so that both were seen as an integral part of the learning materials. To achieve this, a librarian forms part of the module team at the design phase of the curriculum. Reviewing the authored curriculum, typically at the stage of the second draft, the librarian recommends academic literature suitable to support the learning outcomes. Working with content advisors and intellectual property specialists within the library, the team determines whether there is suitable literature already within the library collection which could be linked to the curriculum. If not, they will consider whether the best course of action is to purchase additional materials for the collection or apply to the copyright holder to purchase the right to re-publish the material in the curriculum.

Typically, in the UK context, permission to reuse text and images from books, journals and magazines within an organisation is granted via the Copyright Licensing Authority Licence, costing £9 per student (Copyright Licencing Agency, 2019). When factoring in the

150,000 students studying at The OU, a licence that costs £1.35mn a year has not been a financial priority. Instead, the OU Library purchases the copyright from the rights holders directly. A range of materials are cleared in this way, including text, images, graphics, photographs and video and audio clips. These are then embedded directly into the curriculum to ensure that they are fixed in place for the lifespan of the module. Depending on the nature of the material, individual copyright clearances can be cost prohibitive, however, or may not be possible due to the wishes of the rights holder. Gaining approval to use the rights of published works from the rights holder can also take significant time, which can cause tensions when the module approaches its publication deadline. Materials may be cleared for use in one module only due to cost implications, making the reuse of the curriculum (e.g. in international partnerships or commercial settings) problematic. The management of rights-cleared assets also requires in-house specialised expertise to ensure that items are appropriately catalogued with the necessary legal information to inform future use considerations.

Linking out to academic literature purchased on a subscription basis provides the students with a greater learning experience as they gain skills in finding, managing and referencing information in the wider publishing landscape. Again, the costs of academic literature can be a challenge, with many eJournals purchased on an annual subscription basis, rather than by outright ownership, subject to above-inflation price increases. Library subscription costs are significantly higher than personal subscriptions and in the academic year 2012–2013, UK universities spent £170mn on annual journal subscriptions (SCONUL, 2014). The #ebooksos campaign was successful in bringing this challenge to the attention of mainstream media in the UK, sharing examples of eBook price rises from £39.99 in 2019 to £350 in 2020 for the same content (Anderson and McCauley, 2022). Alongside cost considerations is the need for ongoing maintenance of the collection required by the library team. Journals and books may move amongst publishers, may be removed from collections acquired on bulk without notice, change their names, change their access links and protocols or indeed may even be withdrawn altogether. Annual licences need to be considered and renegotiated whilst operating in the context of institutional budgetary pressures. The library team navigates this landscape with specialist professional expertise on behalf of the university to ensure that the curriculum is enriched with academic research.

To embed the academic literature, the librarian reviews the draft module content and recommends texts in specific areas of the curriculum where the literature would offer a pedagogical benefit to the student. This approach pinpoints texts in the learning experience at the most appropriate time. Students can then link out to the library collections hosted on publisher platforms, from the appropriate section in the curriculum. This approach differs from some online learning environments that have implemented a reading list system that acts as a plug-in to the VLE, bridging the gap between the learning environment and the library management system (Cross, 2015). The OU does provide a reference list of recommended readings within the VLE, but the practice of deep-linking the content throughout the written curriculum materials is a less-common approach.

One crucial challenge the library needed to overcome when adopting this approach was the fluid nature of Uniform Resource Locator (URL) in academic literature. It is not uncommon for article URLs to be changed without warning following technical developments within the publishing house. How could the library ensure that links to articles did not break in between the annual maintenance cycles? An in-house solution, known as LibLink, was developed to provide a persistent URL to literature such as journals, journal articles, ebooks and chapters that the students were instructed to access as part of their learning. The system enables the library to replace any URL, either individually or on mass, with a new URL in a back-end system without the need to change the module material. This enables links to be edited at any point, omitting the need to wait for the annual

maintenance cycle. The change in the LibLink system is invisible to the student, ensuring that all links remain current and reducing calls to the library helpdesk when a link breaks.

Integrating academic literature into the curriculum is just one-half of how the library influences student learning. The other crucial aspect has been the integration of skills materials to help ensure that students become information literate. From the outset of providing services for students, the library recognised that helping students develop skills to identify, locate and evaluate the information provided would need to be core to the service. In 2002, the library established an Information Literacy Unit (ILU) to promote and develop IL at the university (Parker, 2003). The primary objectives of the unit included raising the profile of IL in the university and integrating IL skills into the curriculum (Parker, 2003). The ILU took a strategic approach to embedding itself into the curriculum by working with university administrators and senior stakeholders across the institution. In 2005, the ILU collaborated with the newly formed Centre for Outcomes-Based Education (COBE) to integrate IL into the university's Undergraduate-Level Framework, which was being created, detailing the softer skills OU students were expected to attain throughout their studies (Bennett, 2018).

To support the module teams tasked with creating the curriculum, the award-winning IL Framework was developed, detailing the key IL skills students should gain at each level (or year) or field of academic study in four key areas:

- (1) Understand the information landscape;
- (2) Plan and carry out a search;
- (3) Critically evaluate information and
- (4) Manage and communicate results.

Reedy and Baker (2011).

In response to the emerging need to support students with their digital capabilities, a further review and expansion of the IL provision was conducted. By 2012, the framework had been reviewed and expanded to support the emerging need for DIL. The DIL framework, which is still used to this day, now covers:

- (1) Understanding and engaging in digital practices;
- (2) Finding information;
- (3) Critical evaluation;
- (4) Managing, creating and communicating information and
- (5) Collaborating and sharing.

The Open University (2023b).

To support the skills that students need to acquire in these areas, the library has created a suite of learning objects which can be added to the curriculum by the module teams. The librarians are skilled at using the XML editing system (oxygen) used by the editors and have created a bank of learning objects in a format that is suitable to be embedded in the VLE. These exemplars of best practice provide pedagogically sound skills materials on the DIL Framework topic areas for each academic level of study. During the drafting phase, the librarian will recommend to the module team the DIL skill that would strengthen the student learning experience. Module teams, in partnership with the library, can either use the best practice generic examples directly or revise them to suit their curriculum and learning outcomes (Bennett, 2018).

Learning objects created by the library can guide students who are searching for information in a specific publisher platform necessary for their studies. For example, law

students need to know how to use the vLexJustis database. However, a commercial publisher might rebrand products and redesign user interfaces without notifying their customers. How could the library ensure that skills materials showing how to use a specific database remain accurate when the module midlife review only occurs every three to five years? In the case of vLexJustis, this is exactly what happened when the publisher redesigned and renamed its product, moving to vLexJustis from JustisOne.

To overcome this kind of challenge, the library has created a separate VLE, known locally as Digital Skills for Study (DiSS), to host all of the learning objects created by the team (Clough and Closier, 2018). This central bank of learning objects ensures that the same skills materials can be added to multiple modules at the same level across the curriculum. For the students, it looks and acts the same as their module materials in the VLE, providing a seamless experience. For the library, it allows the team to manage and maintain the skills materials separately from the module materials, ensuring that any necessary edits can be made outside the annual maintenance cycle. Should the skills materials need to be amended – for example in the case of vLexJustis – the librarian is able to edit one learning object within the DiSS system, which automatically updates for all modules referring to the same learning object.

The library's influence on learning

In addition to integrating the library into the curriculum during the creation phase, the library recognised that it had a key role to play in supporting students in their learning during their studies.

In 2000, the library established its helpdesk to provide support for students and staff without their need to visit the library building. Initially, enquiries on how to find and access academic literature were received via email and telephone. By 2002, the library had launched one of the first webchat services within the university. This was later expanded in 2012 to operate on a 24/7 basis in partnership with the OCLC QuestionPoint Service, the forerunner to the SpringShare LibAnswers service still used to this day. Since its launch, the webchat has seen an annual year-on-year increase in use by students, and conversely, support via the telephone has seen a year-on-year decline. Email had been the primary route to provide support to students until 2020. Webchat has been the primary route since then, with the library answering over 11,000 webchat queries in 2021, accounting for 57% of all enquiries received. From the outset, the library team recognised the learning opportunity a helpdesk provides, and all staff were trained to “teach not tell” when answering queries. One of the implications of embedding DIL skills into the curriculum is that students may be required to describe in their assessed assignments the literature search and evaluation process they undertook. The library helpdesk team, therefore, ensures that any request for support in finding and citing information is used to teach the students to do it themselves.

By 2006, the library was exploring the possibilities of web-conferencing software offered for training delivery. The university's decision in 2008 to invest in an online tuition delivery platform provided the opportunity to develop a training programme. A small team of librarians based in Milton Keynes was able to deliver tutorials to students anywhere in the country, using the online platform Elluminate initially and later Blackboard Collaborate. A suite of training sessions was developed on key DIL skills covering topics such as how to search for information and how to cite references in assignments. A regular timetable of training sessions was deployed, allowing all students to attend without the need to register in advance. Alongside these, a small number of sessions were created in partnership with module teams and promoted to students on their module website. These sessions largely followed the same topics as the general training sessions, with examples of information searching tailored to the area of curriculum focus. The impact of promoting the sessions on

the module website and being seen by the students as part of the module tuition strategy was immediately apparent; attendance averaged 44 students for these sessions compared to an average of 4 students for the general programme.

In 2015, the emerging University Group Tuition Policy provided an opportunity for the library to further integrate skills provision into the curriculum. A new Learning Events Management (LEM) system was developed to allow students to book in advance their tutorial attendance and a new online platform, Adobe Connect, was introduced to support delivery. All module teams were required to review their tuition strategies. This provided the opportunity for the library to expand the number of tutorials embedded in the curriculum through strategic relationship management and effective promotion with the faculty. The team reduced the number of general sessions and increased the targeted sessions from 20 to 60 tutorials a year. The module-targeted library sessions were open to all students studying a specific module, advertised alongside other tutorials which formed their academic curriculum. Advanced bookings enabled the library to manage staffing levels and scheduling effectively. The impact of the change was immediately apparent, and the popularity of the tutorials swiftly exceeded expectations. Booking caps of 300 students were routinely exceeded on modules with large student populations, which enabled the library to identify where additional sessions would be required. Average attendance at training sessions also increased further, from 44 in 2012 to 69 by 2020–2021, with library staff supporting the sessions in a ratio of 1:50 students.

The library's impact on education

Academic libraries have long recognised the importance of evidencing their impact on education. As “Few libraries exist in a vacuum, accountable only to themselves” (Pritchard, 1996), the need to assess the academic library in the context of the university's goals is well established. Value and impact measurement can take a variety of different forms, including uptake (or use of) services, user perceptions and linking the library activity to student outcomes (Oakleaf, 2010). At The OU, these are just a few of the evaluation methods used to assess the library's impact on education.

Although work to embed the library in the curriculum had commenced earlier, the strategic recognition of the role of the library in the University Learning and Teaching Strategy in 2009 was crucial in driving uptake by the module teams. From the outset, the objective of embedding the academic literature and DIL skills into the curriculum was recognised as a 10- to 15-year-old goal owing to the length of the course production time and lifespan of the module materials. In the academic year 2017–2018, the library conducted a review of all modules being taught that year to identify where academic literature and/or digital and information skills had been embedded. Once all modules, across all disciplines and levels, with library embedment had been identified, student population data were added to the review to identify the reach of engagement. The success of the strategy was evident; 91% of all students were studying on modules where academic literature provided by the library had been embedded, and 72% of all students were studying on modules where DIL skills materials had been embedded. In anecdotal conversations with peer libraries within the UK Higher Education sector, this level of uptake and reach is unusually high.

From a user's perspective, the university acknowledges the impact of the library on the student's education. In 2018, the library commissioned a research project with the whole OU community it supports to understand the needs and expectations of its users and to determine where the library is currently adding value. Over 30 interviews were conducted using a directed story-telling approach. Participants in the study were academic staff, associate lecturers, professional service colleagues, research students and undergraduate students. They were associated with all faculties and UK nations The OU operates in. Analysis of the

rich data identified several core themes, along with key aspects where the library was seen to have an impact on education. Overall, the library is seen as a prized resource that is central to the work of the university:

I think we're really lucky to have this library. I know it's quite well resourced compared to a lot of other university libraries. I know everywhere funds have been cut and I'm sure the libraries will say no we need this but it's actually compared to a lot of other universities quite rich in resources. Because it's had to be all online I think it's done that really well.

[Quote unattributed].

Staff and students also spoke about the importance of the library input throughout their studies, which has been provided by embedding skills across the curriculum, allowing them to learn the right skills at the right time and through the online training sessions:

I think it can support us as I say with teaching our students. We should almost see the Library as teachers. As educators of teaching students' certain skills, how to do certain things . . . so in that sense it's not the Library as a service necessarily. It's the Library as educators which is quite a different way in seeing it.

Academic, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences

Participants spoke about the value of the library in their work, research and study. The staff talked about the valued role the library plays in supporting students with the "research skills" necessary to be a "scholar", recognising the expertise the library has in this area. Many staff felt the inputs from the library when creating the curriculum was comprehensive and spoke about the value of these inputs:

We did an activity . . . (the Library) took the theme and took the study skills and went away and then came back and had created this activity, which is much better than I could have done, really understanding the skills that we were trying to develop with students.

Academic, Faculty of Wellbeing, Education and Language Studies.

The staff also discussed the impact the library collections had on their curriculum and learning outcomes and the richness of the online resources provided

I've been able to access the Euro monitor databases via the library which has lots of consumption data in it. Consumption usually means that it has an eco-footprint attached with it, so I've used it in my environmental module. That data is quite useful, I've been able write a question in a [Tutor Marked Assignment] on it for the students. Having the raw data is really helpful because it means if you want to pick certain countries that show great increases in consumption, or big changes, then that helps drive the learning outcome. The context helps fit with it nicely and I'm trying to get that embedded in more modules.

Academic, Faculty of Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics

The research identified a challenge the library faces in how to support time-poor staff and students in using a large, complex and rapidly changing online information environment. Time-poor students will gravitate to the familiarity, and simplicity, of Google for information.

Some students have the digital skills and some haven't but they don't have the 'digital patience'. When they have kept research diaries it shows an awful lot of them use Google as they want instant results and encouraging them that it needs to be thought through is hard to get over to them.

Associate Lecturer, Faculty of Business and Law

The library collection strategy to prioritise electronic information provision over print was viewed positively by the respondents in this research. They also identified a need for the

library to support academic staff with these changes. Information searching practices have continued to evolve as online collections have grown in scope and complexity; however, time-poor staff reported that they have not been able to keep abreast of these. The training provided by the library was either too long for them to engage in or not specific enough to meet their needs. The academic staff were also reluctant to contact the library helpdesk, perceiving this is a service for students only. Instead, they would either find workarounds through relying on familiar publisher platforms, contacting authors directly or asking a named individual they had worked with previously in the library for help.

I think for my purposes I can get by, but as I say I probably don't know enough about searching electronically as much as I should. There are things that I'm aware [of] that I don't know how to do, and it hasn't particularly caused problems yet. I guess the problem for all of us is you do what you do to get by and having a library training day would be lovely, but it's an add on luxury in a sense. Because I have enough skills to be able to get done what I need to do, so the additional stuff feels like a luxury actually.

Academic, (Faculty unattributed)

Whilst this research project helped identify areas where the library has a positive impact on the education experience, the continual challenge of making an ever-complex research environment simple for the pressurised academic remains unchanged.

Research on the library's impact on education has also focussed on linking library activity with student outcomes. Following the pioneering work at the University of Huddersfield (Stone *et al.*, 2011), the OU Library decided to investigate if there was a correlation between student outcomes and access to academic literature provided by the library. The study at The OU sought to explore if the same positive correlations that had been identified at a traditional face-to-face university could also be found in a distance-learning context. Over 100,000 undergraduate students who started studying a module in October 2015 across all subject disciplines and levels of study were included in the study. Logs from authentication systems (EzProxy and OpenAthens) used by the library to facilitate access to licenced academic literature were gathered, containing personal identifiers for each student. In line with the University's Policy on Ethical Use of Student Data for Learning Analytics (The Open University, 2014), these logs were combined with the student's individual continual assessment score (e.g. final grade) for the module they were studying when the access occurred. The data were interrogated from a range of perspectives including changes in library access across levels of study and the relationship between library access and student retention, progression and success (Nurse *et al.*, 2018). The research found that students who access more library resources get better results, and students who access fewer library resources are more likely to fail in their studies. Recognising the limitations of the research and acknowledging that correlation studies are not indicator causation, the findings suggest that there is some relationship between a student's use of academic literature provided by the library and their success in their studies.

Building on this work, in 2018, a further research study was developed to explore the relationship between student attendance at live DIL training sessions and student outcomes. Using a similar methodology to the library resources study, logs from Adobe Connect Library training sessions were harvested. Student personal identifiers were retained in the log data and combined with the student's final grade (grouped into categories of fail, pass and distinction). All students who commenced studying a module in October 2017 were included in the study data. The general training programme, as well as the targeted training sessions which form part of the module tuition strategy, were analysed (Killick *et al.*, 2019). As with the previous study, a similar relationship between student attendance at the library training

sessions and student success was identified. Students who attended the training sessions were also the same students who were completing their studies and gaining a high module score.

This is not an exhaustive review of how the OU Library has evaluated its impact on the university; many studies have been conducted over the years in line with the user-focussed continual improvement culture shared by the team.

Conclusion

This case study has focussed on the role the library plays in developing the curriculum with module teams, through embedding content and skills materials and the support provided to students during their studies. It is not an exhaustive case study of all aspects of the library, which also plays a crucial role in supporting research and managing information and institutional knowledge. It is also not an exhaustive case study of all aspects of how the library supports students, for example, through its work to make information accessible to all students and the wider support for society through the award-winning skills materials *Being Digital* (Clough and Closier, 2018).

To successfully provide academic library service at a distance, it is crucial to integrate the library collections and IL training into the curriculum. In doing so, students recognise the need to access and use the library as part of their studies, which at times can be a seamless learning experience. Gaining recognition from university administrators on the need to integrate the library into the curriculum through the institutional learning and teaching plan has been a key enabler for achieving this goal. This, and ongoing work with module teams, has been achieved through effective relationship management. Working as a partner with the academic team, the library's professional expertise is recognised and valued within The OU. Research has discovered a correlation between student engagement with library resources and improved student outcomes; similarly, there is a correlation between student attendance at library training sessions and student outcomes. The innovative nature of the OU Library has resulted in leading technical solutions for providing library content and services at a distance. As others seek to follow into this arena, it is hoped this case study will inform future thinking.

Note

1. It should be noted that The Open University in the UK is subject to the regulatory frameworks of England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales. Other regulatory frameworks have similar requirements.

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Library's
influence and
impact on
learning

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291

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