



### **Article**

#### ***Non-use of Library Services by Students in a UK Academic Library***

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### **Abstract**

**Objective** – This study examined low or non-use of the library at St. Martin's College, UK and determined the possible reasons for this. Additionally, this study investigated the other sources of information non-users were accessing. The results were then fed into the library's future strategic planning cycle.

**Methods** – Using data from the TALIS management system, a postal survey was distributed to students who registered as low or non-users. Non-users were considered a hard-to-reach target group, and a further classroom-based survey was administered.

**Results** – The findings showed that students in part-time and distance learning courses were the largest group of non-users. Other factors influencing non-use included the purchase of books, use of the Internet, and a lack of awareness of services available.

**Conclusions** – The library service needs to target non-traditional student groups, particularly those taught off-campus, with innovative induction techniques. This survey highlighted the need to embed information skills teaching into the curriculum and a recent restructure of the department has enabled this to happen with a more focused approach to academic liaisonship.

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## **Introduction and Background**

Higher education is changing rapidly. Like much of the world, the UK system is becoming increasingly open and diverse with the underlying strategic aim of being available to all. This is evidenced by the UK government's widening participation target of having 50% of all 18-30 year olds in higher education by 2010 (DFES 63). People from disadvantaged backgrounds are being encouraged to consider entry, and this increased emphasis on students from non-traditional backgrounds has caused student retention to surface as a major strategic agenda item. As a consequence, UK institutions in the 21<sup>st</sup> century are becoming more responsive to the needs of their customers than ever before.

Advances in technology have made possible virtual classrooms, online courses, and distance learning. This, coupled with the growth in society's access to information via ICT, has altered student perceptions of what the library has to offer. If libraries are to maintain their relevance in the cycle of student needs, then they must adapt and change. Listening to the needs of those who choose not to use our services is one way of being responsive to that change. Philip Payne, Head of Learning Support Services at Leeds Metropolitan University, argues that, "There is an increasing focus in academic libraries on users and in meeting their needs. Measuring the impact of our services potentially forms part of having a customer focus" (Everest and Payne 18).

The Corporate Plan of St. Martin's College outlines in its vision for the future that St. Martin's will, "Improve its ability to listen to and respond to students, their needs and aspirations" (St. Martin's College 6). In line with that sentiment, the Library Service Strategic Plan states in Aim 1.2 that the service desires to "Critically evaluate Library Services to assess impact and

introduce service enhancements" (Library Services 23).

A lack of knowledge regarding what potential users want makes it difficult for the library to provide suitable services for them. As Peter Brophy, Director of CERLIM at Manchester Metropolitan University suggested, "Users do not use services in the way we think they do, partly because librarians are inconsistent in our promotion of services" (Everest and Payne 19).

Library staff are extremely good at surveying the needs of their users. Various methodologies have been in use throughout the sector, most commonly the exit survey or questionnaire. They are used primarily to establish student satisfaction levels and to determine improvements they would like to see to services and facilities. However, comprehensive user survey methodologies which produce statistically valid findings are expensive and timely to produce. This is evidenced by the work done at the University of California San Diego libraries, which employed a consultant to assist with the construction of a large scale project (Talbot 358). Within the field of academic librarianship in the UK, the methodology advocated by the Society of College, National and University Libraries (SCONUL) is commonly used and has been employed at St. Martin's College Library for the previous three years.

Libraries are less proficient at canvassing the opinions of those who do not use their services, although some attempts have been made within the public sector as part of general community sampling or as surveys of lapsed users. In an academic setting however, it is taken for granted that the students will use the library of their institution. Higher education institutions have historically functioned largely as closed communities with only students registered on recognised courses allowed

borrowing access to materials; as such, the library stock and services are directly aimed at specific course needs. In practice, however, a significant minority do not borrow books from the library. The perception on the ground is that this situation is increasing. The purpose of this research was to discover if this is the case at St. Martin's College and what the possible reasons would be for low or non-use. The results could then be fed into the library's future strategic planning cycle.

### **Institutional Context**

St. Martin's College is a higher education institution based in the North West of England primarily Lancaster, Carlisle and Ambleside with satellite sites in Barrow, Whitehaven, Tower Hamlets and Greenwich (the latter two in the south of England). St. Martin's has 11,274 students (6,839 FTE) of those 5,918 are on part time courses and of those 181 are taught on a designated distance learning course.

The College is the largest national provider of initial teacher training and education. A major part of the College's work is specialist provision in relation to the allied health professions. A significant proportion of students study on degrees in the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences with a particular emphasis on Sports and Outdoor Studies.

St. Martin's library aims to provide a common service framework enabling students to receive the same quality of service regardless of location. The library provides fully staffed library services on the three principal sites of Lancaster, Ambleside and Carlisle. Library services are provided jointly at the satellite sites by a range of agreements with the Health Trusts, Tower Hamlets Schools Library Service, and Woolwich Boys Polytechnic Technical School.

### **Literature Review**

A range of databases were searched to identify relevant literature. This included LISA, ASSIA, Infotrac, Web of Science, and Electronic Journal Service. Although some work has been done on non-use of library services, non-user surveys in academic libraries proved to be scarce.

Sridhar has examined the theoretical concepts behind the terms "non-user" and "marginal user," and he includes a case study from the ISRO Satellite Centre in Bangalore which concludes that it is important to identify the characteristics and needs of non-users if libraries are to increase their market penetration (Sridhar 21). He acknowledges that opinion is divided in the profession as to the relevance of non-user data; as such, surveys can be costly and complex. They also often result merely in enhancing the service for existing users. He goes on, however, to argue that the absolute non-users may be stimulated into using the library if it can modify its services to suit their requirements (14).

Early work in the field of academic library non-users includes that of Lubans. Although his work predates the mass electronic information era, he does identify that, "Non use to any degree is a serious problem" (362). Lubans' study centers around the Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute Library in New York and concludes that patterns of non use are more prevalent amongst undergraduates than other client groups of the library.

Martell has examined downward trends in circulation figures amongst Association of Research Libraries members in the USA over a nine-year period. The results show a comparable increase in non-user statistics which he attributes to an increase in the use of virtual technologies being the preferred method of accessing information (438, 443).

New technologies themselves are not the panacea of all information needs. The University of Abertay, Dundee, discovered this in its survey in the spring of 2004 which was aimed at student use of electronic resources only. This research found that, "The main reasons for infrequent or non-use of resources is lack of awareness and perceived lack of relevance. Lack of time is also a barrier" (Millar 68).

Non-user surveys have been conducted in Coventry, Leeds, and Warrington in the UK public library sector (Strategic Planning and Marketing, Market Research, Molyneux). These were conducted generally through the post, as a questionnaire or as street surveys using a professional market research company. An article on a lapsed borrower survey in Essex, "Where have all the issues gone?" found that changes in ICT usage and the Internet were the prime causes of non use of public libraries, along with conflicting demands on leisure time from a competitive society. The most cited cause was "lack of time" to read (Hawkins 10).

Further examples of non-user surveys were discovered. Louise Flowers from Upper Goulburn, Australia comments that, "As yet the professional literature does not acknowledge the topic of non-users in its own right, probably because there is only a small body of research that specifically addresses this issue" (Flowers 67). This is confirmed by Sridhar, who notes the difficulty in compiling non-user surveys and suggests this has led to an imbalance in the research literature (Sridhar 2).

The literature highlights limited research into reasons for non-use of academic libraries that could be used for strategic planning. Therefore, this project aimed to investigate the level of non-use of traditional library services at St. Martin's College and to ascertain the reasons why some students were not engaging with the printed material

available to them. To this end several objectives were put forward:

1. To discover what sources were being used to satisfy the students' information needs given that they were not borrowing books
2. To ascertain whether age, gender, or mode of study had any bearing on non-use
3. To establish whether opening hours were convenient for this user group
4. To calculate how many of the target group had access to a PC and how much use was made of the Internet and other electronic resources
5. To determine what level of training these students had received to access resources electronically
6. To discover what effect changing patterns of teaching and learning have had on the use of traditional library services
7. To establish whether the target group received a library induction in any form and how this was perceived by those who had received it
8. To establish the main reasons why these students made little or no use of traditional library services
9. To discover how this group of students perceived the library service

Examining these research objectives would enable the library to draw conclusions about how it could improve and encourage this group of students to make more use of the services available. Subsequently, service improvements via the library service strategic plan that would encourage higher levels of use or realignments of service provisions in accordance with the needs of this group could be made.

## Methodology

The research project was conducted over a three-month period between March and May 2005. A pilot questionnaire was trialled with two groups of students to ascertain if the wording was appropriate. Following amendment, 2,189 questionnaires (see Appendix) were posted to students who registered as low or non-users according to TALIS, the library database. Low use was defined following a discussion amongst the management team as students who had borrowed three items or less in the previous twelve-month period. This amounted to 21% of total student numbers. A further 800 questionnaires were distributed to classrooms. Lectures were identified on a specific day via the timetabling office and tutors were asked to

## Findings

Five hundred eighty-six forms were returned by post equating to a response rate of 26.5%. Three hundred eighty-two surveys distributed via classrooms were returned; however only those who indicated that they rarely or never used the library ( $n=24$  or 6.28%) were analysed as part of the research. Overall, the project returned a 27.3% response rate.

Half these responses were found to be from satellite sites of the College, and it was subsequently discovered that, due to differences in the library systems at the different sites, many of these users were local borrowers at the satellite site rather than non-library users. These were also

Faculty	Frequency	Percent
Not Known	52	12.8
Health	213	52.6
Education	76	18.8
Arts, Humanities and Social Science	64	15.8
Total	405	100.0

**Table 1.** Non-users by Faculty

distribute and collect the survey forms at the start of their session. Although this created the possibility of duplication with the postal survey, students were asked not to complete the survey twice. There is, of course, a chance that some students may have ignored this request resulting in duplicate responses. The results were collated using the SPSS statistical software package where the data was analysed against a number of variables such as cohort groups or location to provide a comprehensive report.

removed from the sample, reducing the non-user response rate of traditional library services to just under 14%.

The results presented below are therefore based on actual non-users (14% of students at St. Martins College).

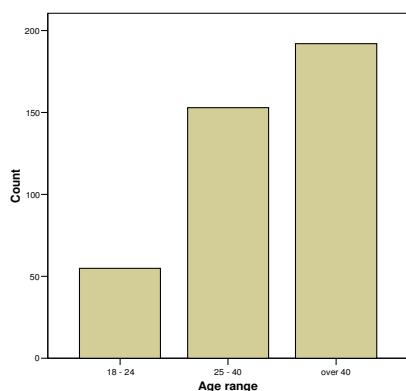
### *Non-users*

The Faculty of Health and Social Care produced the largest number of non-users ( $n=213$ ), of those over half of them do use other university or NHS libraries.

Two programmes in particular, Nurse Practitioners and Preparing Mentors for Professional Learning and Development, showed the highest levels of non-use. The mentoring program is taught almost exclusively off-campus in remote locations throughout the region. These areas have been targeted for further work by library and academic staff.

### *Demographics*

The data confirmed that 318 (78%) of the non-users in the College were female. This is in line with the College's intake ratio of 4:1 female to male. Three hundred forty five respondents or 85% were over the age of 24. It would appear from these results that the incidence of non-use of library services does increase with age. However, these results could also indicate that older people are more diligent in returning their survey forms.



**Figure 1.** Age of Respondents

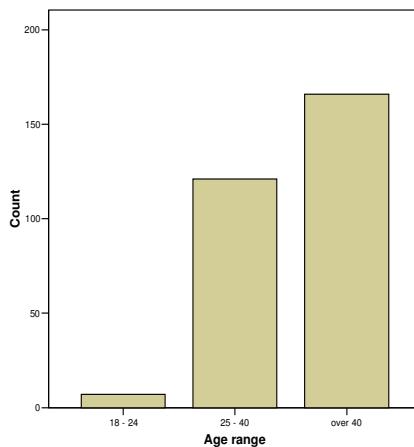
### *Mode of Study*

The majority of respondents ( $n=298$ , 73%) indicated that they were on a part time course.

Study mode	Frequency	Percent
Not answered	19	4.7
Full Time	88	21.7
Part time	298	73.6
Total	405	100.0

**Table 2.** Mode of Study

A further analysis of the age ranges based on those who are in part-time courses virtually eliminates those in the 18-24 age range. Those over 40 are the highest non-users, as they are overall (192 or 47.4%). Thus, mode of study and age do seem to be predictors of use of the library services.



**Figure 2.** Mode of Study by Age

### *Year Group*

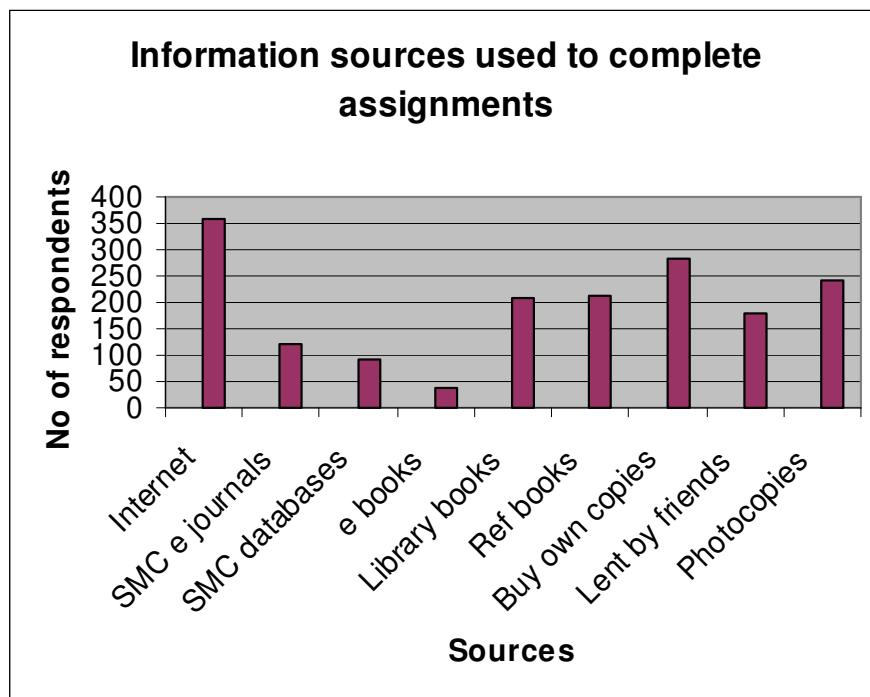
Students in the first year of their study make up the largest group of non-users. These may be students who have not yet been assigned work that requires use of library resources or students who have not yet found their way into the library. However, given the timing of the survey (after two full terms), it is reasonable to expect them to be using the library facilities. Those on diploma courses (short modules lasting less than one

year) also made up a large group of non-users.

#### *Information Sources Used*

The results highlighted that non-users not only made no use of traditional library services but only made limited use of the electronic resources provided by the library.

respondents (n=120) reported that they had not been offered any form of induction. These were mainly students taught from remote locations such as church halls or school based situations where the College is working with the community. The library must creatively develop more alternative induction packages for those not taught on a main campus.

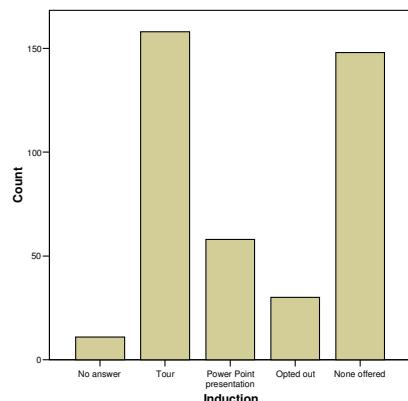


**Figure 3.** Information Services Used by Library Non-users

Just under a third of non-users (n=120) did not make any use of the College's electronic resources and fewer than 10% (n=39) accessed the e-books collection. In contrast to this, the majority (n=357, 88%) use the Internet as a source of information for their assignments.

#### *Induction to Library Service*

Inductions are organised by academic staff, particularly for courses taught off campus. Induction was analysed in terms of take up with tours being seen as more useful than PowerPoint presentations. A third of all



**Figure 4.** Methods of Induction

### *Access to IT*

Use of PCs was predominantly in the home, with 74% (n=298) using them there. Substantial numbers of students used work or library PCs to access IT facilities. However, the following other locations were also identified:

	Frequency	Percent
PC at home	298	73.6
PC at work	106	26.2
PC in library	76	18.8
Friend's	11	2.7
Hospital site	6	1.5
Public library	4	1.0
Learn Direct	1	.2
Wireless laptop	1	.2
Other HEI	1	.2
In the gym	1	.2
Parents	1	.2

**Table 3.** Access to IT

### *Reasons for Non-use*

The majority of respondents cited distance from the main campus (n=275, 68%) as the main reason for non-use of the library (an option not anticipated on the questionnaire and thus not shown in figure 5). Almost a third (n=130, 32%) respondents used other university or NHS libraries instead of St. Martin's Library. This is perhaps due to the successful introduction of the UK Libraries Plus scheme that allows reciprocal access at local academic libraries for students in part-time and distance learning programs. Also, many of the students in health-related courses are able to use the libraries at the hospital where they undertake placement.

Other reasons cited were no time, (n=63, 16%), inconvenient opening hours (n=26, 6.4%), difficulties finding items on

shelves (n=23, 5.6%), lack of help from staff (n=15, 3.7%), no need 15 (3.7%), uninviting (n=11, 2.9%) and finally 1% (n=5) do not use the library because they do not like libraries at all.

### **Discussion**

Given that the target group for the survey was students who were perceived to be not engaging with the library, a response rate of 26.5% was deemed to be above that expected. This meant that, although numbers at individual sites were low, the overall responses were indicative of the group and findings could be extrapolated to form trends that had the potential to improve the whole service to make it more attractive to non-users.

The timing of the project was determined by institutional funding arrangements and had to be dovetailed with other project work within the library. As a consequence, the post-graduates and 3rd year cohorts of students were not present for the classroom-based questionnaires. They did have the opportunity to respond via the postal survey so were not excluded from the research.

Changing patterns of learning have affected library use, with 168 or 41% of respondents reported to be on a course supported by open and distance learning. This correlates with the finding that distance from the library was the single biggest factor, cited by 275 respondents (68%) of non-use. Respondents did, however, display some confusion over the term "distance learning," with some stating that they were in a distance learning course even though the College does not provide their course on such a basis. Students often assumed that, because they lived at a distance from the College, that they were in a distance learning course. The College as a whole perhaps needs to examine its use of

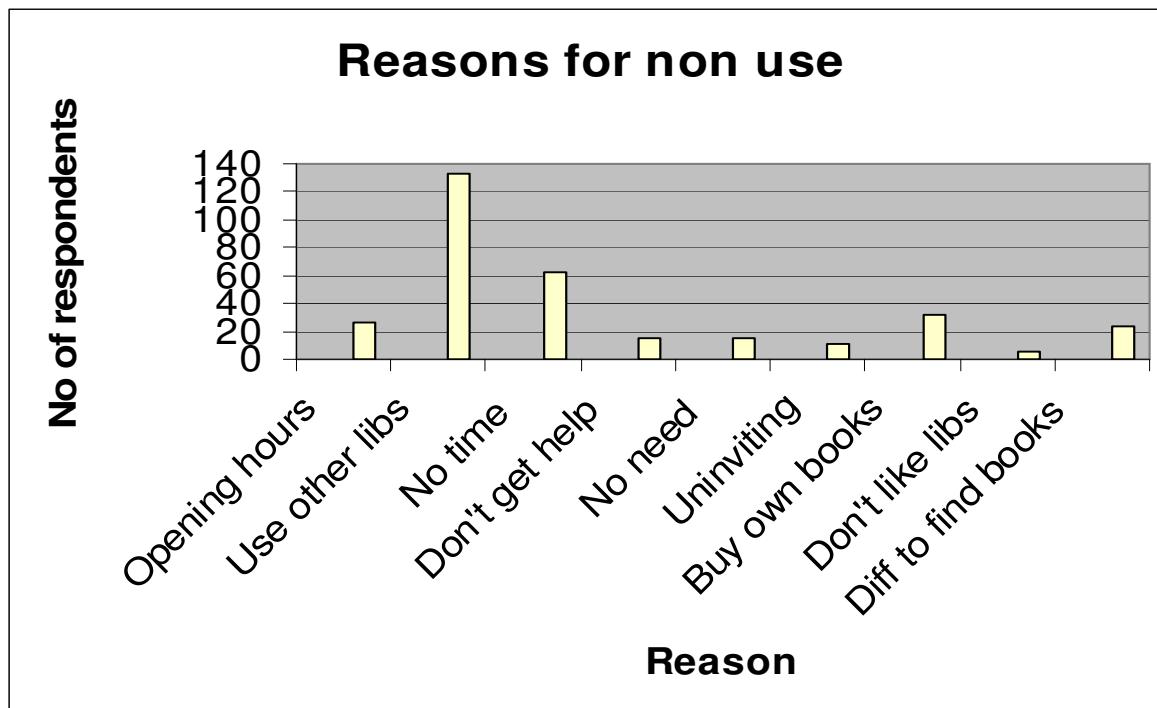


Figure 5. Reasons for Non-use

terminology and ensure that it is clear and understandable by all. Some distance learning courses make heavy use of Blackboard, the institution's virtual learning environment where tutors may post reading materials in digitized form. A new digitization service has been established within the library service but at the time of the survey this was not widespread; therefore, material provided in digitized formats through the VLE is not likely to account for the lack of use of library materials.

The responses indicate that many students are not aware of all the library services offered. This highlights the need to do much more in terms of marketing, publicity, and promotion. This was particularly apparent in the area of electronic resources. Students reported not knowing about the electronic services available. Many reported that they either did not know about the resources or that

they did not know how to use them. Several students cited lack of confidence as a factor in non-use of electronic journals, databases and e-books, and many requested further training aimed in the form of drop in sessions and printed literature posted out to their home addresses. It is clear that some students completely misunderstood the nature of electronic resources. For example, 27 students (3%) answered that they did not use them because they thought that they were "too far to travel," whilst a further 18 (2%) thought that Athens was a database rather than a password authentication system. More training was requested by students, particularly in ICT skills for mature students and those who struggle with computers.

An interesting factor was that 32 respondents said that they bought their own copies of books and an additional 44 borrowed from their friends. This could be explained by the fact that many are mature

students who perhaps have more demands on their time in terms of work and family commitments. As one student said, "I buy all my essay books from Amazon and have them delivered to my house." This demonstrates a significant shift away from the concept of the library being the provider of all the research and information needs of students, and it is noted that the private or second-hand market is becoming increasingly competitive in this area. The fact that reciprocal access schemes are so popular again diminishes the monopoly once held by individual academic institutions.

Organisation and support of students in flexible and distributed learning courses and part-time students who live at a distance are important considerations for the library. A postal loan service is provided, but these students did not appear to be using it or were unaware of its existence. This was demonstrated by a comment from one student who asked if it would be possible to set up a postal service. Again, this indicates areas where the library needs to market its facilities and services more explicitly. Actual distances from the library did not in itself appear to play a part in non-use, as 26% (105) of respondents lived within 10 miles of a main campus library. The acquisition of 12,000 new e-book titles as a result of an agreement with Net Library has the potential to support students at a distance, providing the issues relating to electronic resources noted above can be addressed.

Students who do not borrow books are on the whole not using other library services either. Two hundred ninety-eight respondents access the computer from home (73%) or 106 from work (26%). Those who do visit the library building do so mainly for photocopying services, 101 (25%) or private study.

Other factors in non-use of St. Martin's library services was use of other university and NHS libraries by 33% of respondents, which is indicative of the success of UK Libraries Plus and other reciprocal access schemes in meeting the needs of part time and distance learners. In contrast to the surveys of non-users in public libraries (Molyneux 20, Strategic Planning 14, Market Research UK 11) 'lack of time' was only a factor in n= 61 or 15% of cases. St. Martin's does not open its libraries 24/7, and opening hours, which were expected to be a prime reason for non-use, were cited by a small number (n= 26, 6.5%).

When asked to consider improvements to the service to make it more attractive for them to use, a range of comments were made. Students inevitably requested more stock, in particular books and journals. They asked for improved inductions and training from the library, and suggested "an idiot's step-by-step guide to take away and use from home." Some asked for easier online access, and this was particularly in relation to password difficulties via Athens authentication protocols for the databases. The College is currently working towards the establishment of a single sign-on for the network. Comments about staffing, like "have more people on the desk – there is always a big queue," tended to acknowledge that staff were extremely busy and often have little time. There were also several positive comments received, such as "whenever I use the library the service has been excellent."

The fact that few responses came from the main body of undergraduate or taught postgraduate campus-based courses suggests that the work which the library is currently doing with these groups is working well and that they are being taught library skills and subsequently using the service. The main groups of students who do not use traditional library services are

those who may feel on the fringes of the College due to their part time or distance mode of learning. Even then, one third (n=133) of those are using library services near to their home or place of work.

The survey was successful in reaching a proportion of those students who were not using the library service; however, further data could have been usefully gathered from this group by follow-up telephone interviews with a sample of respondents. Time and funding were factors in preventing this further drilling down into the data.

### **Conclusion**

This survey of a UK academic library highlighted that the main reasons for non-use of the library services were students studying on part time or distance learning course who make heavy use of other libraries or buy their own texts. These students use the Internet to access information but are not using the electronic resources provided by the library. The results of the survey have shown that the library needs to become much more creative in its marketing, publicity, and promotion to non-user groups, particularly part-time and distance learners.

As a consequence, the Faculty Liaison teams have been strengthened within a new structure and library staff now work more closely with course and program leaders to ensure that all students receive meaningful induction and subsequent training on databases, information searching, and critical thinking skills. An increasing number of students are taught not to rely totally on the Internet for their information needs. Work has been done to embed this training into the curriculum wherever possible and library staff are increasingly included in the training of students at remote locations.

Further research is needed to analyse the effectiveness of our actions in 2-3 years time when it is hoped that much of the impact of increased training and promotion will have had a positive effect on usage figures.

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