How are Students and Lecturers Using Educational Resources Today?

A summary of research into the changing UK Higher Education environment

This paper is a summary of research conducted in the UK by Gold Leaf over the 15 months leading up to February 2019. The research was commissioned by SAGE Publishing and the full report comprehensively details the research methods and findings. This summary picks out the key insights the SAGE team have found of particular interest.

Is the teaching and learning environment changing?

The goals of the study were to survey the UK undergraduate higher education environment, and to attempt to define the pedagogies and learning resources currently favoured in the UK. The study paid particular attention to the Social Sciences and also looked to understand how publishers might better engage with the community, across faculty, librarians and students in higher education. The aim is that by understanding the current environment and use of learning resources better, students can be helped to achieve improved outcomes.

It is a period of change and experimentation for teaching and learning in higher education, but more through evolution than revolution. Among survey respondents, 82% of the academics, 62% of the librarians and 45% of the students surveyed said the approach to pedagogy had changed at their institution. Before broaching the use of learning resources, librarians and academics were asked to comment on the wider environment and its impact on teaching and learning.

![Figure 1: Which contextual factors are impacting teaching and learning?](image)
There is a strong sense across librarian and academic respondents that changing student expectations have impacted on teaching within the university. In interviews, some librarians and academics spoke of students (and parents) increasingly linking a good degree to the cost of education (with particular attention on tuition fees), suggesting a commercialisation of education. The researchers found that many institutions feel that asking students to pay extra for resources has become a political ‘hot potato’.

There is scope for institutions to not only compete to meet those expectations, but also to help manage them so that they are realistic. Increasing competition between institutions, and new accountability measures such as the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), make this a growing challenge. This can be further exacerbated by tensions over changes to academics’ working conditions and rewards.

Views on learning resource use

Universities are exploring a range of learning and teaching approaches, albeit in different ways and at varying rates. More traditional and newer methods might be used simultaneously by the same institution, department or even individual academic.

Traditional resources such as journals and textbooks remain the most widely used. The use of journal articles is strong and books (textbooks and monographs in digital and print) continue to be seen as key; together these two do still form the most important undergraduate learning resources cited.

The most common change in practice is a rise in flipped classrooms. Although there’s no standard definition, this tends to feature technology-enhanced learning, more dynamic learning activities and students taking greater responsibility for their learning – for example with more pre-class preparation and online assessments. It can also result in academics’ contact time being more targeted – on key concepts, activities and individuals. Such approaches are often combined with more traditional pedagogy, giving students a blended learning experience.

The research suggests a rise in research-led teaching approaches, which may be helping drive the reported increased journal usage. Additionally, more undergraduates are being encouraged to publish themselves.

Some academics promote a wide range of learning resources, including online quizzes and games, interactive websites, videos, and simulations. Academics and librarians tend to overestimate the extent that newer resources are being used compared to students, who sometimes don’t use the resources they are encouraged to, or say they need more guidance.

Some academics are conscious of the costs to students, especially of textbooks, and are starting to develop their own open educational resources (OERs). This can include open textbooks, monographs, online quizzes, lecture notes, podcasts, videos, lecture capture, etc. However, academics can find it hard to make the time to develop and update them. Universities often support these efforts as they can create university-specific resources, that are free to students, and (if made fully open) support Open Access.
A focus on Social Science

The research focused in on five Social Science subjects in particular, seeking a deeper understanding of the Social Science approach to resources. The study’s academic and student focus groups came from these disciplines and the researchers also incorporated one e-textbook aggregator’s data on student reading behaviour within these subjects, showing the average number of pages read over a year and the average number studied ‘in depth’ by subject area.

![Snapshot of student reading behaviour by subject](image)

**Figure 2: Pages read/studied in depth across five subjects**

The data in Figure 2 illustrates the number of pages browsed versus in-depth study by subject given by one e-textbook aggregator; this particular data set also showed that about 50% of learners are using the web reader on the aggregator’s own platform, with about 25% using an Apple mobile device (iPads or iPhones). For students frequently on placements (such as in Education or Nursing) mobile devices play a big role in accessing content and students are more likely to access content offline. Interviews suggested that simulations are particularly important in Nursing.

**Views on how students should be supported**

The research found that librarians and academics feel students would benefit from more support in different arenas, with librarians viewing need for stronger information literacy support, while academics are keen on stronger critical and study skills support, as well as more/better resources. Students were less emphatic about their support needs in their responses.
Views on who does pay and who should pay

How learning resources should be paid for is a question for policy, at a range of levels (from supranational initiatives such as Plan S to national, institutional or individual departments). The most popular option across respondent groups was for a ‘mixed economy’ model, with students, institutions and libraries all contributing. The ‘institution buys texts for each student’ model has not gained much traction in the UK.

Figure 3: What further support could students benefit from?

Figure 4: Current institutional practice on who pays for resources
When asked what the policy should be, 32% of the 93 students that answered the question wanted ‘everything available through the library’, 35% a ‘mixed economy’, 1% ‘students buy essential texts’ and 31% the ‘institution buys texts for each student’.

The researchers found that some academics wear two hats when thinking about resources: the lecturer concerned about book prices on behalf of their students and that of the author interested in royalties. Academics often voiced concern about the price of resources (especially textbooks), and want more diversity in the formats that publishers offer (though not necessarily to pay for this). There seems to be an appetite among some academics for resources to be more customisable.

Librarians face growing and changing demand, as well as expanding publisher portfolios, often with (at best) static budgets. This makes them cost sensitive. Many want more pricing transparency and dislike some pricing models. They tend to want: more resources via Open Access; more available digitally (though they concede many students prefer print); fewer usage restrictions; and a more generous approach to access, especially for distance-learning students, those at affiliate institutions, and for alumni. Many libraries have electronic first policies, though not all resources are available or affordable in this format. Neither secondary data nor respondents could provide accurate comparisons between print and electronic resource use (or efficacy).

Nearly all librarians said that the Copyright Licensing Agency (CLA) licence – the main vehicle by which permissions for materials included in coursepacks are secured – had no effect on resource use. At one university the library was spending a considerable amount of its resource fund on the extended terms offered by the licence in return for extra fees.

The way in which the library is being used is also undergoing change. One library (with approx. 20,000 patrons) shared data on physical visits to the library, showing an increase between 2014 and 2018 (seeing a jump from an average of 56 to an average of 66 visits per user per year); however, loans of print items fell from 6.3 to 3.8 per user in the same period, suggesting a different use of the library space than prior years. The library measure of cost per use, shows the cost per electronic download stabilised at an average of £0.58, having reached a high of £0.80 in 2014–15. Cost per print loan almost doubled in the same period, rising from £3.12 in 2014–15 to £6.28 in 2017–18.

Reading list software is highly prevalent in the UK environment and can be useful in providing additional data on reading times, downloads, annotations, etc. Such data can also be used to tailor support to groups of students with different usage patterns (and learning needs). Librarians can use reading list software to support or influence academic and student resource choices, including steers to resources that are already held. Such software can provide valuable data about usage, especially when combined with student surveys. However, some academics don’t use such software at all and most of those that do need help from the library, e.g. uploading resources on their behalf.

Librarians tended to underestimate their sway when it comes to learning resources, but the research revealed a ‘virtuous circle’ of influence, detailed below. This represents an opportunity for librarians’ roles to be communicated better. There is also an opportunity to involve them more in discussions between academics and publishers.
UK students professed to value currency above format; they want textbooks up-to-date, shorter and (for many students) in print. The majority of students use print and electronic resources, but for different purposes respectively. Students are generally willing to buy some learning resources. Students would like to use interactive websites, short ‘how to’ video clips, electronic journals, digital textbooks and online tests. They would also like reading lists to be clearer about which resources are essential and which are for aiming higher.

Are the Russell Group different?

Surprisingly, the research found no major differences between how Russell Group and other universities use resources. Digital textbooks and journals are slightly more commonly used among the latter group, which tends to use a wider range of learning resource types. More traditional, research-led teaching methods are cited more commonly at Russell Group institutions.

The research seemed to show that students at non-Russell Group institutions tend to be slightly more price sensitive and so are more often offered ‘no hidden costs’ policies, whereas Russell Group institutions are less likely to provide all resources for free.
Methodology

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This multi-methodology research involved a review of relevant literature, analysis of existing data from a university library and an aggregator, as well as opt-in, snowball-recruited online surveys with 399 UK academics, 79 UK librarians and 108 UK students. Qualitative ‘deep dives’ at five universities (Greenwich, Huddersfield, Nottingham, Edinburgh and Surrey) involved semi-structured telephone interviews with academics and librarians and six focus groups with undergraduates.