What do academics want – a survey of behaviours and attitudes in UK higher education.

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A new survey has been undertaken which looks at the changing practices of academics in the UK. **Ben Showers** *of Jisc and* **Mike Mertens** *of RLUK discuss three key findings of the survey which demonstrate the influence of new technologies on research, the altering perceptions of support services and the changing role of the academic library.*

Imagine having years of rich data on how new technologies, changes in funding and other environmental factors, have an impact on research and are reflected in the attitudes and behaviours of academics. Such a body of data might be used to help critically inform new services, resources and systems to support staff and students in universities and colleges across the UK. Since 2000, universities in the US have had precisely that thanks to Ithaka S+R, who have been undertaking a survey of US academics every three years to identify changes in research processes, teaching practices, publishing and research dissemination, alongside the evolving role of the library and scholarly societies.

Two UK organisations who are helping universities respond to the changing needs of academics, Jisc and Research Libraries UK (RLUK), recognised the invaluable resource that Ithaka S+R had developed with their US faculty survey programme. Collaborating with Ithaka on a UK version of the survey was therefore a very exciting opportunity and the results represent a chance to build on a valuable source of research looking at the changing practices of academics.

The findings of the UK academic survey, published on 16th May, contained a rich set of data that the sector can continue to interrogate and interpret. We want to share three aspects of the survey which we believe show the influence of new technologies on research, the altering perceptions of support services and the changing role of the academic library.

The academic author/reader dichotomy

As authors academics aspire in the main to reach an audience of their peers while broader impact issues are of less concern [figure 38, page 67]. The choice of publication to disseminate their research is similarly driven by a desire to be read by academics in their field and creating high impact, this is often therefore a peer-reviewed journal [figure 40, page 70].

While two-thirds of respondents valued a journal for being free to publish in, only one-third saw value in it being free to readers. Although, interestingly, there were considerable differences between the humanities and sciences/medical sciences on this question.

FIGURE 40

"When it comes to influencing your decisions about journals in which to publish an article of yours, how important to you is each of the following characteristics of an academic journal." Percent of respondents who indicated that each of these characteristics is very important, by disciplinary grouping.
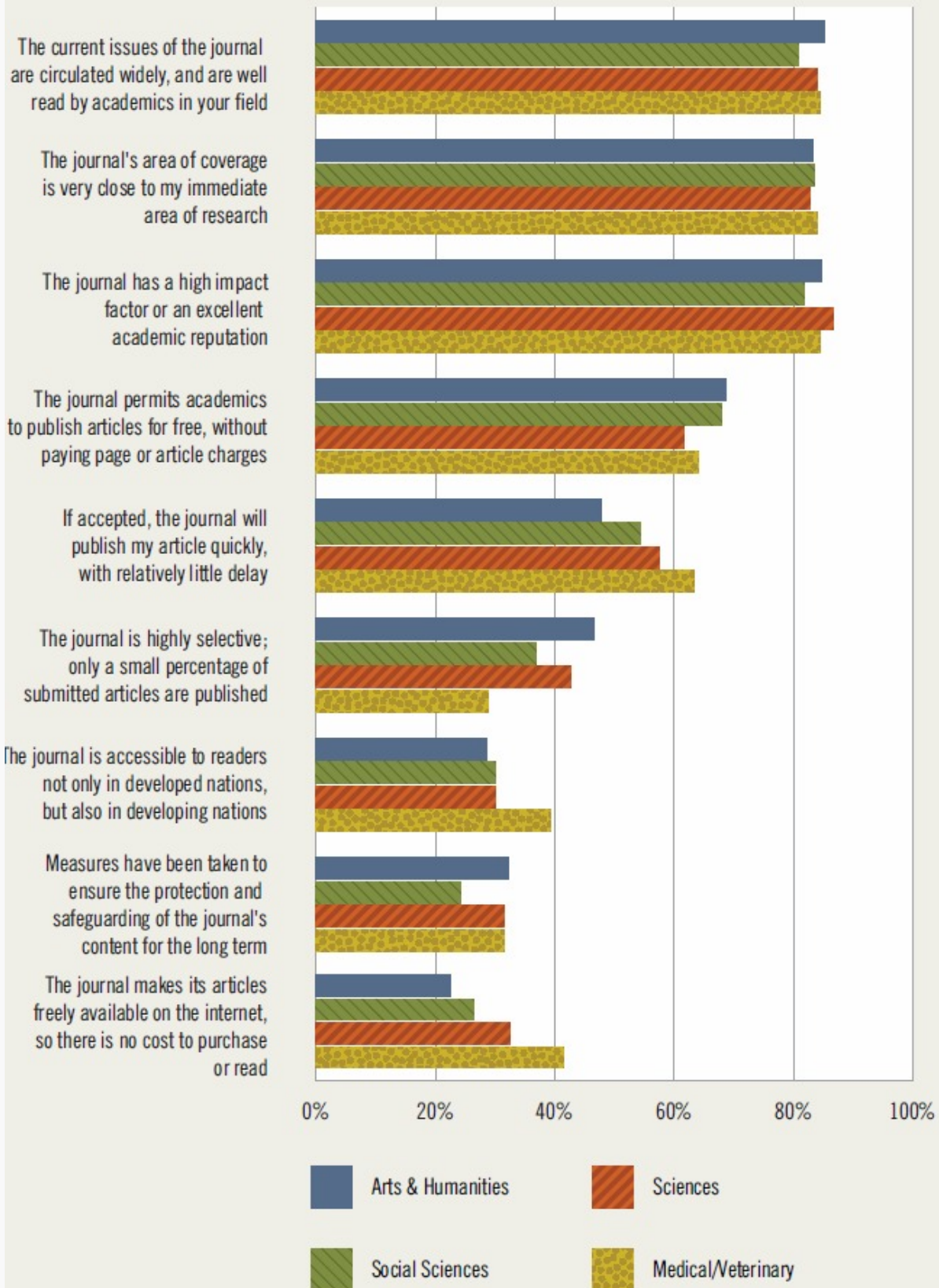
The current issues of the journal are circulated widely, and are well read by academics in your field

The journal's area of coverage is very close to my immediate area of research

The journal has a high impact factor or an excellent academic reputation

The journal permits academics to publish articles for free, without paying page or article charges

If accepted, the journal will publish my article quickly, with relatively little delay

The journal is highly selective; only a small percentage of submitted articles are published

The journal is accessible to readers not only in developed nations, but also in developing nations

Measures have been taken to ensure the protection and safeguarding of the journal's content for the long term

The journal makes its articles freely available on the internet, so there is no cost to purchase or read

0%   20%   40%   60%   80%   100%

Arts & Humanities   Sciences

Social Sciences   Medical/Veterinary

Figure 40, page 70

In contrast, academics as readers seem to be more attuned to a rapidly scholarly landscape. 90% of respondents indicated the importance of the library as content provider for commonly used journals and monographs. But, interestingly, the next most important source was freely available material on the web (this was around 60% for arts and humanities and up to nearly 80% for medical and veterinary sciences) [figure 20, page 39]. The importance of freely available material on the web was emphasised when the survey asked how academics would search for material that is not available through the institutional library. Here 90% of the respondents – with almost no disciplinary difference – searched online for such material.

FIGURE 22

"When you want a monograph or journal article that you do not have immediate access to through your college or university library's physical or digital collections, how often do you use each of the following methods to seek access to that material — often, occasionally, rarely, or never?" Percent responding that they use the following methods "often" or "occasionally," by disciplinary grouping.
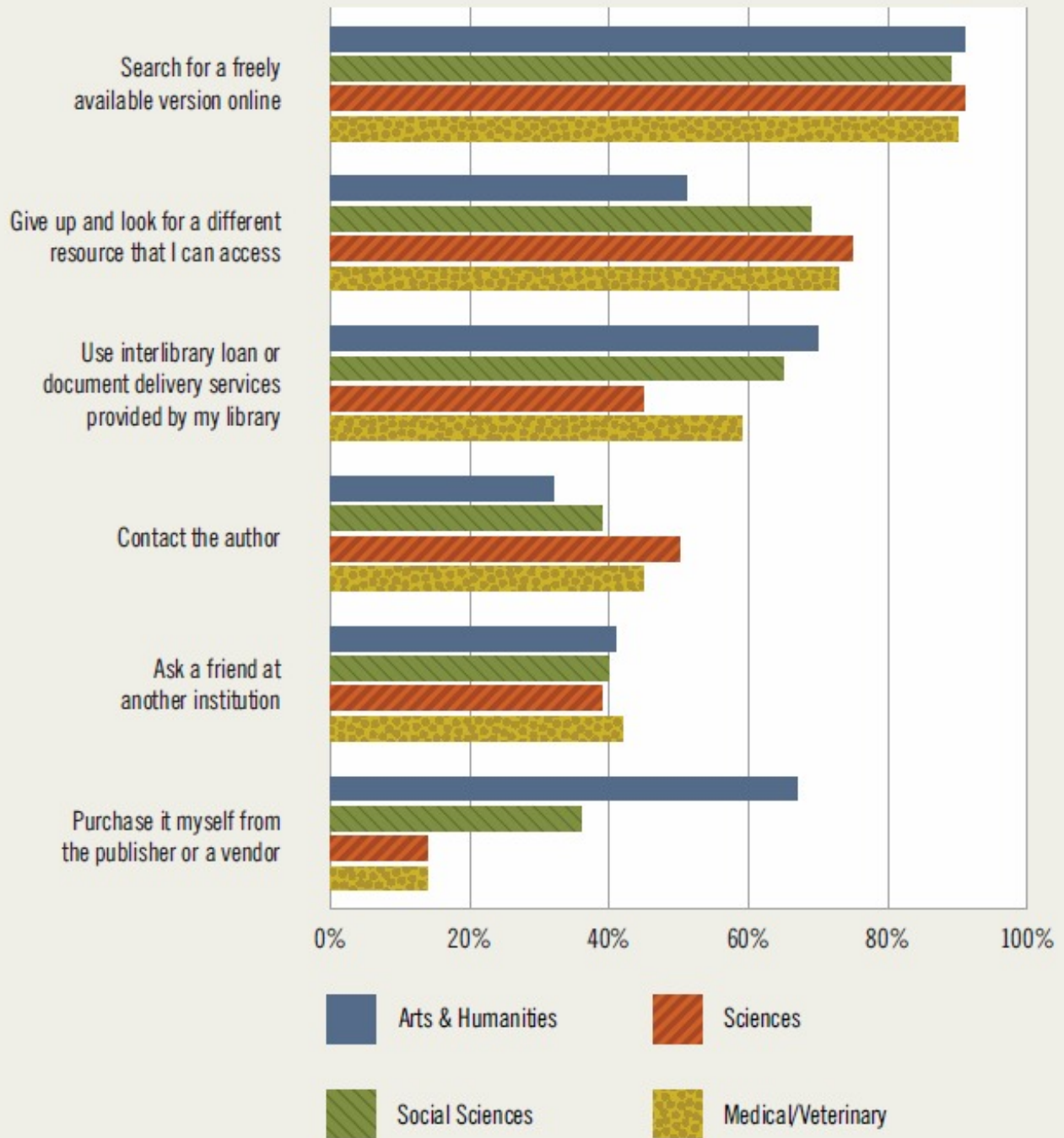
figure 22, page 41

As readers, academics therefore discover and access a very large proportion of their content freely online. Some of this 'free' content may actually be paid for and delivered through their institutional library. However, this contrasts with the value that the academic as author places on the journal that is free to publish in, but not free to access. Understanding this apparent dichotomy might be very important to furthering both the definition and practice of Open Access.

From print to electronic

For academics, whether as readers or authors, the survey suggests a resounding acceptance of electronic journals. Indeed, when asked, 'If my library cancelled the current issues of a print version of a journal but continued to make them available electronically, that would be fine with me' around 70% of respondents agreed strongly (around 60% for arts and humanities and 80% for sciences and medical and veterinary sciences) [figure 10, page 29].

Despite continuing concerns surrounding entirely replacing hard copy journal collections with e-only ones [figure 12, page 30], electronic journals are a case where the digital version has supplanted the hard copy version in regard to actual use. For ebooks however the picture is less straightforward.

The survey underlines that for academics, electronic versions of monographs are not well suited to some research activities. Specifically, a majority of academics indicated that reading cover-to-cover or in depth reading was 'much easier' or 'somewhat easier' in print format [figure 16, page 34]. In contrast, searching content and exploring references in digital monographs was viewed as 'much easier' or somewhat easier' by a majority of respondents (around 65%) [figure 16, page 34].

The transition to digital monographs emphasises the continued role of print within the scholarly landscape for some time to come, in lieu of technologies that assist researchers to mine and collate information more easily using electronic versions

Indeed, few respondents saw the use of ebooks becoming so prevalent amongst academics and students that it would no longer be necessary to maintain physical collections within the next five years (only around 8% of humanists, rising to just over 20% of medical/veterinary academics) [figure 18, page 36].

The role of the library and the librarian

A major set of findings highlights the value academics place on the role of the library within their teaching and research. While only 2% of respondents visited the library to begin their research query, nearly 90% of respondents saw the library's most important function as a purchaser of content. Furthermore, around 30% of respondents indicated that the library has a role in increasing the productivity of their research.

"How important is it to you that your college or university library be the provider of each of the functions below or be the provider of the capacity listed below?" Percent of respondents indicating that each of the following functions or capacities are very important.
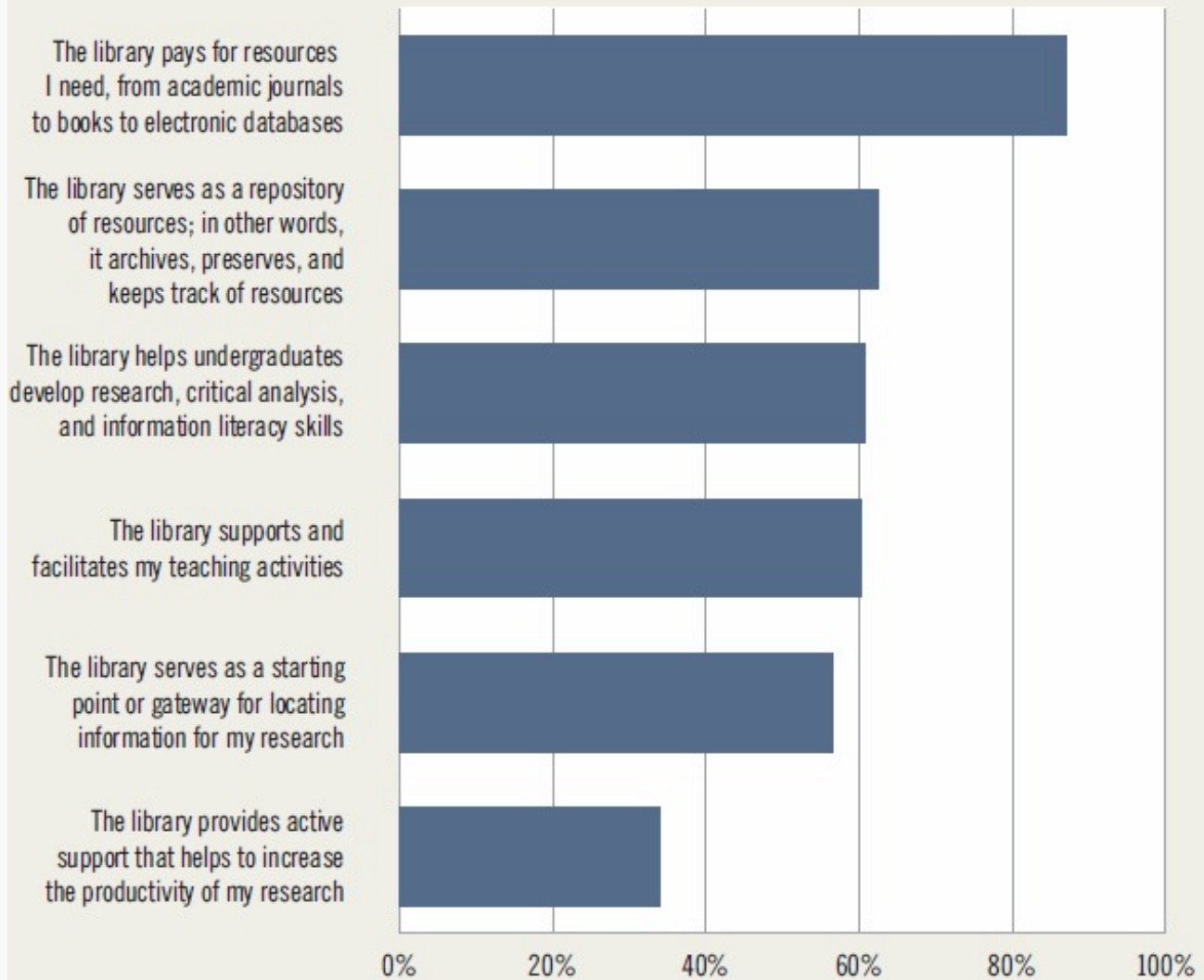

figure 45, page 79

This is perhaps not surprising, but may have implications for libraries as their role in collecting and procuring content gradually changes with an increase in open content and user-initiated purchasing. If the library as 'gateway' to content has been eroded with the emergence of the web, so the role of the library as 'buyer' of materials under traditional regimes may also be under threat with the development of new content models. However, the obverse of this is that there may be more room for the library or academic institution to act as a publisher itself. This may be underlined by the high degree of preference expressed by academics to publish first and foremost through university presses over other academic publishing routes.

If the overwhelming view of the library's role is currently as buyer, it was also seen as having a valuable role in teaching and learning. Around 40% of respondents agreed that interaction with librarians helped their students do better in their courses.

Overall, such being the high regard in which institutional libraries are held, only about 12% of respondents felt that access to online content and resources meant funding should be redirected away from the library buildings and staff.

But, around 25% of respondents saw easy access to online content as potentially devaluing the role of librarians. Indeed, if we isolate scientists that figure increases to nearly 35% [figure 51, page 87]. These figures may point to the need for librarians to adapt more quickly, in the secure knowledge however that the functions of the library have an essential place in the minds of researchers.

What's next…?

The survey results will be put to practical use as part of both Jisc and RLUK's ongoing work. The findings will feed into Jisc's work on scholarly communications as well as the Information and Library Infrastructure programme. For RLUK it will inform its work on redefining the research library model (which will help to shape RLUK's next strategic plan from 2014) and its ongoing activities to help member libraries and the wider community adapt to the changes and patterns of service use portrayed in the report.

However, in the meantime, we urge you to read the report and its findings, and keep an eye on the Academic Survey events page where videos and a report from the survey workshop will be posted shortly.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the Impact of Social Science blog, nor of the London School of Economics.

About the Authors

Ben Showers *is a programme manager with the Digital Infrastructure team at Jisc. Ben is part of the Information and Library Infrastructure programme and manages a number of areas of work, including library systems, user experience, mobile infrastructure and shared services. Ben is also currently managing a project to develop a shared analytics service for UK academic libraries. Prior to this Ben worked with the Content team at Jisc, working on a number of digitisation and digital scholarly resource programmes exploring innovative new models of content creation and curation, such as crowdsourcing. Ben holds an MA in Philosophy as well as an MA in Library and Information Science from University College, London.*

Mike Mertens *is Deputy Executive Director and Data Services Manager of RLUK. Previously, Mike held posts at the University of Birmingham, in Bibliographical Services and Learning and Research Support. Originally involved in NFF-funded work and RSLP cataloguing projects, during that time he also contributed to the creation of the Eurostudies section of Intute, and was commissioned by the Foreign & Commonwealth Office to work on a Conflict Studies portal. Mike currently also serves in an advisory capacity for the following organisations and projects: Archives Hub Steering Committee (2006-); Copac Steering committee (2009-); LIBER Steering Committee for Digitisation and Resource Discovery (SCDRD) (2009-); LIBER Europeana Working Group (Chair) (2010-), and both the JISC/RLUK Discovery Advisory group (2011-13) and Discovery Technical Advisory group (2011-13). Mike also served as a member of the Digital Preservation Coalition Board (2006-2011).*