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# Supposing is good, but finding out is better: a survey of research postgraduate students at WIT libraries

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## INTRODUCTION

The staff of Waterford Institute of Technology (WIT) library service are committed to continuous improvement and to providing quality service for all of the library's users. Part of this commitment involves communicating with our different user groups by means of surveys, with a view to ascertaining their needs and fulfilling their requirements as effectively as possible. A survey of undergraduate students and academic staff was, for example, completed in 2003.<sup>1</sup>

Given the strategic importance of fourth-level education to Ireland's economy, the number of research postgraduate students registered at WIT

has increased incrementally in recent years. Based on this, and on a recommendation following on from an audit of the library service to review the borrowing entitlements of postgraduate students at WIT, we had decided by 2008 that a survey of research postgraduate students was now timely. This article describes the background to the survey, its design, development and administration. The results of the survey and proposed actions going forward are also discussed.

## BACKGROUND

The library provides a comprehensive physical support framework for research postgraduates in the form of dedicated postgraduate suites (within which individual work spaces are provided) as well as postgraduate meeting and thesis rooms.

In a bid to further support these students, the library also appointed a postgraduate liaison officer in 2005. Her main role is to act as a primary contact or communications vehicle between WIT's postgraduate support unit, the library and the research postgraduate community. The liaison officer participates in a number of postgraduate events across campus, thereby providing the community with a familiar name and face to contact in the library.

While we have long recognised that research postgraduates represent a distinctive group of students with unique research needs, and while many efforts have been made to provide relevant and effective library services for them, this was the first time that a formal survey of the group was undertaken.

## PURPOSE OF SURVEY

The main purpose of this survey was to establish contact with research postgraduates in order to gather feedback from these students on their levels of awareness of and satisfaction with the library services most relevant to them. The survey also provided the students with a forum for comments and suggestions, so as to provide us with recommendations for the long-term development of library services for postgraduates.

The services and facilities surveyed represent key aspects of the library service. They include borrowing, inter-library loans, access issues, collections, electronic resources, library website, websites by subject, academic liaison team, information desk and learning support.

## METHODOLOGY

The key areas listed above provided the basis for ten general survey categories which, in turn, contained 43 quantitative and qualitative questions, as suggested by library staff responsible for each area. In addition, an initial category on the student profile was included. This contained some preliminary questions in order to elicit the stage of study the respondents were at, their field of research and whether they had completed their undergraduate studies at WIT. As referred to earlier, the final question on the survey asked the respondents for comments or suggestions.

## DATA COLLECTION

It was decided early in the development stage to deploy an online or web-based survey methodology. This was done for a number of reasons. The demographic of research postgraduates in WIT is varied. Many are studying part-time. Flexibility and convenience of access are thus key, with the postgraduate support unit recommending e-mail as the preferred, and indeed most practical, mode of contact for research postgraduates.

In addition to this, WIT holds a licence to the commercial software package SurveyMonkey (<http://www.surveymonkey.com>). SurveyMonkey is an online software tool that allows account or licence holders to quickly and easily create anonymous, web-based surveys, composed of a variety of quantitative and qualitative questions from templates available on screen. The availability of these templates ensures consistency of style, colour, text appearance and layout and makes for a professional look and feel.

Each survey automatically generates an e-mail link which, in our case, meant that we could contact all of the research postgraduates within a single e-mail distribution. The e-mail invited students to complete the survey from their web browsers. This method ensured that the survey was not dependent on location and further addressed the need among this grouping for convenience and practicality.

The SurveyMonkey software also provides effective and efficient tools for data analysis. The responses to quantitative or closed questions can, for example, be downloaded in spreadsheet documents for statistical analysis, while the responses to qualitative or open questions can be exported to a word processor for thematic breakdown.

Overall, we consider that for the purpose of the research undertaken SurveyMonkey served its function very well.

## CONDUCTING THE SURVEY

It was also decided early in the development stage to survey all members of the research postgraduate community at WIT. In line with Chrzastowski and Joseph (2006), 'a survey of the whole, rather than a sampling method' was selected.<sup>2</sup> This involved mailing the survey link to all full- and part-time research postgraduates. Prior to this, a draft version of the SurveyMonkey questionnaire was pre-tested among library staff. Feedback was positive.

The survey was mailed to 168 students in total on 27 May 2008. The deadline for completion was 13 June 2008. We felt that this two-and-a-half-week time span allowed sufficient time for students to complete the survey. Students were assured that all replies were voluntary and anonymous.

Although one of the main disadvantages of online surveys relates to a lower response rate than with traditional postal surveys, in the case of this survey the response rate was relatively high. Replies were thus received from 59 students, making for an overall response rate of 35%. This is a satisfactory response rate, which we consider fulfils the main purposes of the survey. As will be outlined in the 'Findings' section below, it represents research postgraduates' levels of awareness and satisfaction with the library services and facilities that are particularly relevant to them. It also provides us with student recommendations for the long-term development of library services for postgraduates.

## FINDINGS – DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

The main results of the survey are outlined below. Based on Mark Twain's claim that 'Supposing is good, but finding out is better',<sup>3</sup> these results are discussed in terms of our assumptions of postgraduates' awareness of and satisfaction levels about library services and facilities, as opposed to their actual awareness and satisfaction levels. As will be outlined below, the results provide 'food for thought' for library projects going forward.

### 1. Departments

Question 1 asked students to indicate their department at WIT. As we predicted, the majority of respondents (47.4%) are registered in the graduate business and computing, maths and

physics departments. In contrast, the departments of architecture, education, construction and civil engineering and nursing did not provide any respondents.

This division accords with the overall division of research postgraduates at WIT, where the departments of graduate business and computing, maths and physics have the largest number of research postgraduate students, while there are very few research postgraduates registered in the departments of architecture, education, construction and civil engineering and nursing.

## **2. Borrowing**

Research postgraduates may borrow ten long-loan books (for thirty days) and two short-loan books (for two days). We assumed that the students were aware of this quota and wanted to determine if they were satisfied with it. Surprisingly, the majority of the respondents were unaware of their borrowing rights. In a bid to redress this issue, detailed information on borrowing rights has been added to the postgraduate page on the library website. More positively, those who were aware of their borrowing rights expressed general satisfaction.

## **3. Inter-library loans**

The inter-library loans service obtains books and journal articles that are unavailable in WIT libraries from other libraries worldwide. Our assumption that inter-library loans is an essential service for researchers was borne out in the survey results, which reveal that 70% of respondents have availed themselves of inter-library loans. Overall satisfaction levels are very high, with 97% expressing satisfaction with the service. These results are very encouraging, as is the following positive comment, which was included in the comments section of the survey: 'Excellent service, the staff are very pleasant and professional.'

## **4. Collections**

The collections section of the survey explored postgraduates' perceptions of the relevance of the various library collections to their research. Not surprisingly, and in line with the results of the survey recently undertaken by Walton and Harvell in Sussex (2008), the results of our survey also 'confirm the importance of online access to journals and databases'.<sup>4</sup> Databases and electronic journals were rated 4.61 out of a possible 5. As expected, books were also considered very relevant, with a rating of 3.55. Surprisingly, the research postgraduate students did not rate print journals particularly highly, ranking them at 2.80.

Not surprisingly, audio-visual items were perceived as the least-relevant library collection for researchers, ranking at 2.35.

Students' satisfaction levels for each of the individual collections are consistent with these ratings; however, there is some demand for subscriptions to additional databases. The position is clearly articulated in the following student comment: 'Electronic journals are good in general, but there is a couple we don't have access to which would be helpful.' While we do not expect to be significantly adding to our subscriptions in the short term, raising students' awareness of our existing database collection is high on our agenda for the coming academic year.

## **5. Webpages**

The library website is designed and maintained by a core team of library staff. The website recently underwent a major transformation in a bid to make it more user-friendly and easier to navigate. This survey was interested in gauging research students' reaction to the site's new look and feel. The fact that 58.7% judged the site as very user-friendly – the implication being that it is easy to navigate – was positive.

Questions were also asked to gauge usage of the library's websites by subject pages, designed to act as a portal to quality web resources. Although it was determined that only 34.8% of research postgraduates use these pages, this is, on reflection, probably not that surprising since these pages are mainly targeted at undergraduates. In a bid to increase their usage by postgraduates, a link to the pages has recently been added to the postgraduate webpage.

## **6. Information services**

Information services incorporate the information desk and the learning support service. The survey found that 63% of research postgraduates have used the information desk and, according to the following comment, they are satisfied with the service received: 'I think they do a good job ... they are always very helpful.'

In terms of the learning support service, the survey revealed that 82% of the students surveyed are aware of the availability of the library's training programmes on the key research databases. This is a positive finding. When asked if they would be interested in attending organised tutorials, 44% of the respondents expressed interest, while 56% did not. These findings align with our own feelings on research postgraduate training:

that is, that while some students are interested in database training, others regard themselves as self-sufficient in this area.

Despite this, the fact that approximately 80% of the students surveyed did indicate some interest in attending reference-management, inter-library loan and specific database training sessions in the future has provided us with a roadmap for planning library-training sessions in the longer term. These sessions are currently in development and are being piloted among the research postgraduate community.

### **7. Liaison and communication**

WIT libraries academic liaison team is composed of library staff who have been appointed as liaison or communications officers between the library and the individual schools and departments at WIT. As mentioned already, the team includes a research postgraduate liaison officer, who works closely with the postgraduate support unit at WIT. Based on this fact, we would have assumed that the research postgraduates would have been aware of the liaison service. The results of this survey, however, reveal that 63% of the students surveyed are unaware of it.

This suggests a need to review the means by which we communicate with research postgraduates. The point is, indeed, articulated by one of the survey respondents, who recommends 'e-mailing research postgraduates at the beginning of each semester reminding them of the service available'. In line with this suggestion, the results of Walton and Harvell's survey at Sussex led them to also recommend 'transferring resources' into what they describe as 'more successful channels (personal contact, liaison and webpages)'.<sup>5</sup> As a result of these findings, the research postgraduate liaison officer has in recent months initiated a process of regular e-mail contact with postgraduate students on all library-related issues.

### **GOING FORWARD**

A fundamental concern when conducting any user survey, small-scale or otherwise, is the extent to which the results and recommendations will be used to inform the service in the longer term. Hernon (2000) stresses the importance of keeping promises to change the library service based on the findings of a survey.<sup>6</sup> At the very least, as was revealed in our survey, a survey is a good way to establish communication between the service and its users by offering them a straightforward

means of providing feedback on issues relevant to them.

As outlined in the 'Findings' section above, despite a lack of awareness of some resources and services, the survey reveals that the research postgraduates at WIT are generally satisfied with the library service. In a bid to increase overall satisfaction levels, we are committed to actively addressing any areas of dissatisfaction that arise and to ensuring that the library service remains relevant for these students into the future.

In relation to this, the following actions are under way. The postgraduate support page on the library website has been updated to include research postgraduate borrowing rights and a link to the websites by subject page. The library learning support team is currently running pilot sessions on endnote, inter-library loans and specific research databases. Regular e-mail contact has also been established between the postgraduate liaison officer and research postgraduate students.

As outlined in the introduction, we are committed to undertaking more detailed, follow-up surveys of all of the library's users, including research postgraduates, in the longer term. Watch this space!

### **NOTE:**

A detailed report from the survey is available at [http://library.wit.ie/ResearchSupport/PostgraduateSupport/Pgrad\\_survey\\_report\\_Aug81.pdf](http://library.wit.ie/ResearchSupport/PostgraduateSupport/Pgrad_survey_report_Aug81.pdf).

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