Build it and they will come

UKSG eNews 431

12 October 2018

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Following a library move to a state of the art building in September 2017, Royal Holloway library made use of the opportunity for innovation to create a collection based on reading list material to support teaching and learning. The following editorial will explain the creation of the High Use Collection and explore some of the difficulties and successes of introducing it.

The High Use Collection was created to serve two purposes – to improve access to reading list material and to reduce footfall in the silent areas of the new library. People fetching and shelving books had been a major noise issue in the old library.

Strategically the creation of the High Use Collection raised the profile of the reading list system. This resulted in reading lists receiving funding from the college, with over £250,000 spent on reading list material including £116,000 of Strategic Development Fund money in 2015/16, in addition to the creation of a reading list team who ensure lists are inputted and material ordered promptly.
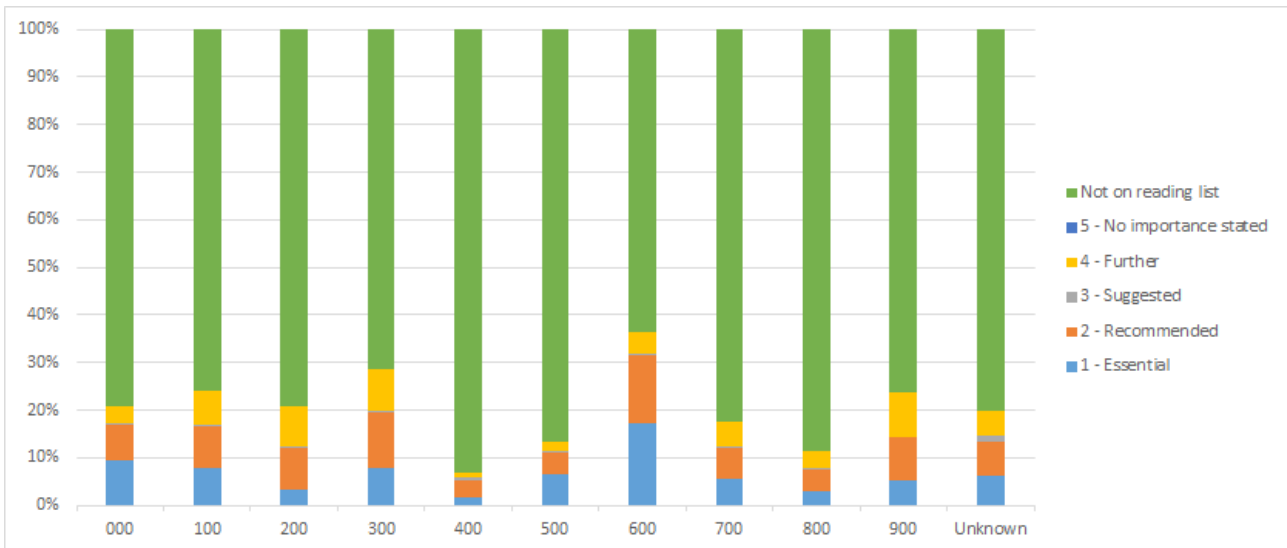

Fig 1: proportion of stock in each area by importance

The majority of our collection was not on a reading list, so the proportion to move to High Use was potentially 67,029 items (31,203 titles) or 19% of the catalogued stock, including Further reading. However, the space in High Use only accommodated approximately 50,000 items so the decision was taken to remove Further reading. This reduced the predicted numbers being added to approximately 47,0000 items or 13% of the catalogued stock.

The name of the collection was an area of discussion. The working title was Teaching Collection, but this proved potentially confusing because researchers felt that it wasn't for them. Equally the name Research Collection for the General Collection was confusing for non-research based students who felt they couldn't use it. Eventually the name High Use was settled upon as it was neutral, not suggesting ownership by any group. It also allows flexibility as a very popular non-reading list title can be moved into High Use. General was the agreed name for the other collection.

Naturally in separating out our reading list and research collections we came across a number of challenges which we learned to navigate. One of the major issues we have needed to overcome has been using and managing data to ensure that the collections actually have the correct stock in place and that they're doing what they're supposed to. In creating a working reading list collection it was vital for us to be able to identify exactly what items are on reading lists as well as the importance of each title. As reading lists are updated and inputted throughout the year, we also needed to be able to check this information on a regular basis. We found a variety of barriers to being able to find this data.

At Royal Holloway University library we use Talis Aspire as our reading list solution and Alma as our library management system. To correctly identify which items are needed in each collection we needed to be able to compare data from both of these systems. Unfortunately for us, we quickly found that Talis and Alma don't speak well together, meaning we needed to come up with a variety of workarounds to create and maintain our High Use Collection. This included creating workflows using advanced excel formulae which compared Local Control Numbers with MMS IDs to identify the barcodes of items on reading lists along with the highest instance of importance so that we could ensure the correct items were in the High Use collection. While we did find a process that works well to deal with these issues, and which a trained member of staff can complete on a weekly basis to update the collection, during our first year using the collection we found we had issues with our catalogue which affected the data we were using for our High Use Collection. This issue, which meant that in many cases the same title was showing up as two or three separate records with separate MMS IDs, meant that we were finding instances where there were copies of a High Use title in both the High Use and General collections, and that many items which definitely were on reading lists as essential, recommended and suggested were not being identified and moved into the High Use Collection. This has again required multiple workarounds and processes requiring manual checks, which is not an ideal situation to be in while attempting to keep the collection up to date and to meet the user needs.

Another area which has been a real challenge has been the actual maintenance of the physical stock. It is really important that the correct items are in the collection to enable students to use the collection to its fullest. This requires a significant amount of maintenance. The collection needs to be constantly updated. Moving items on a weekly basis has needed a significant amount of staff time, which has been pulled from other stock management tasks. Items were added to the collection (with little way of knowing exactly which Dewey area these would be moving from) until by Easter the collection had grown to almost full capacity in many areas. This meant that it was extremely difficult to shelve in certain areas, that we had no room for new books, and that the team were undertaking an almost constant stock shuffle to make space in the growing areas of the collection.

Because of these issues we undertook a large scale summer project to remove any Further and Non-reading list items which had been left in the collection from the previous year and move them into the General Collection. Because this project meant moving around 20,000 items we also needed to map the collection, ensuring that space was created in the correct areas in the General Collection. We used the opportunity of more space in the High Use Collection, along with a year's worth of data, to plan where space needed to be in the High Use Collection in an attempt to mitigate some of the issues we faced in the first year. Overall the project was a real success, with us gaining the opportunity to learn new skills and processes to cope with the movable nature of the collection, as well as the chance for us to identify further areas for improvement with the catalogue and the collection as a whole.

Staff and students have needed educating on the purpose of the collection. For staff this exercise has been heavily linked to the promotion of the reading list system and requests for reading lists. In essence, if they don't tell us what is on their lists the books won't be in the High Use collection. We have seen a 70% increase in the number of lists submitted by the start of term. Students also expect their reading list material to be in the collection. Overall student feedback has been positive. A few students were confused by it but the majority were positive about the two collections. "Love the High Use Collection being downstairs – nice and accessible." The confusion has been addressed this year through further promotion of the collection, especially through library induction.

While we came across many problems within the first year, the collection itself has been a real success. The High Use Collection has made up the majority of our total loans across user groups, clearly proving the value of the collection.
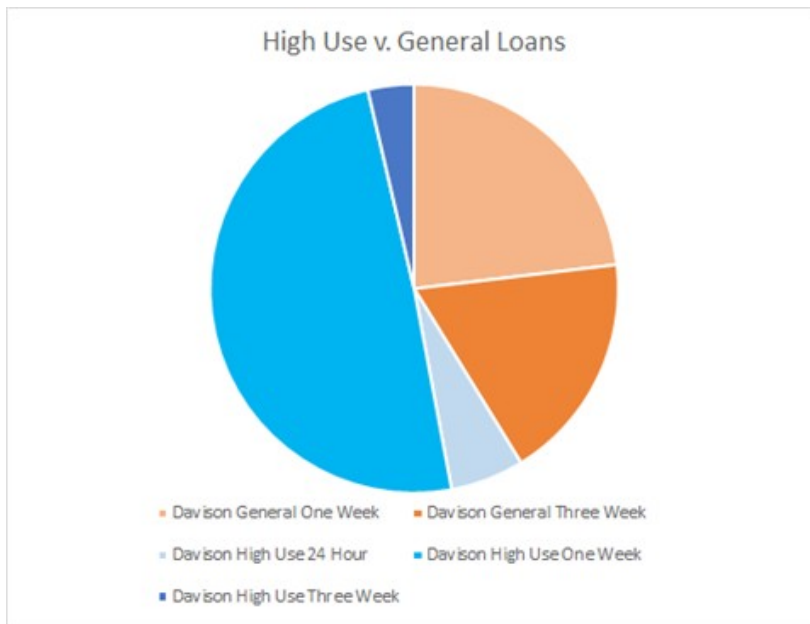

Fig 2: loans separated by loan length

Equally, bucking the trend of most institutions, our loans for the past two years have actually slightly increased, which can be attributed to the visibility of the High Use Collection.
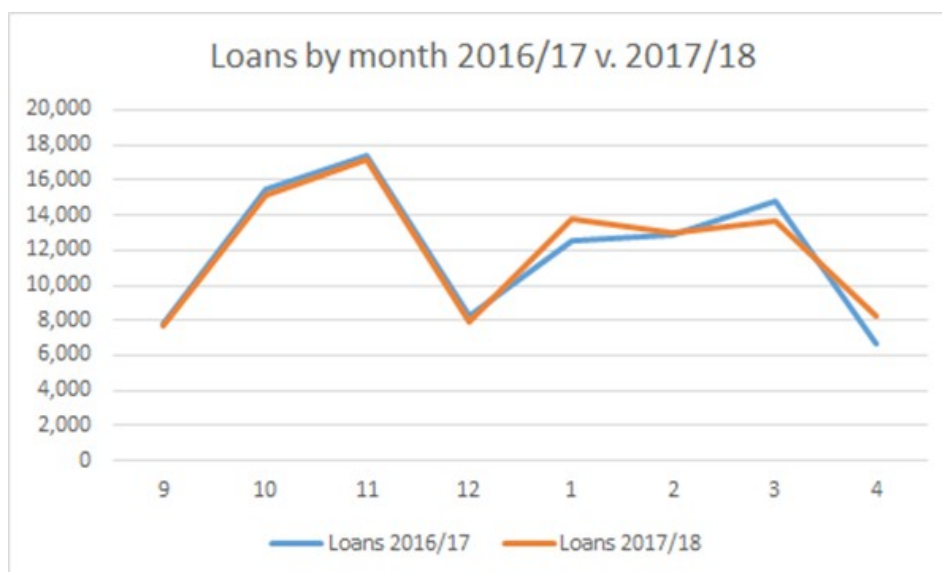

Fig 3: loans by month

An unexpected success of the High Use Collection has been the positive impact it has had on drawing users to the library helpdesk. The fact that the High Use Collection is such a pivotal collection for supporting learning, and that the helpdesk sits directly in the middle of the collection has allowed us to engage with more users, enabling us to explain other benefits that the library offers and to deliver basic information literacy training at the desk to more people.

The first year of the High Use Collection has seen many unexpected challenges but has been overwhelmingly positive. It has had a tangible impact on our ability to support teaching and learning, and we're already seeing a change in user behaviours as the collection becomes part of the culture of learning at Royal Holloway. While we still have a lot of work to do on improving our catalogue, and on developing and streamlining our collection management processes moving forward, we are sure that the collection will improve the student experience as we continue to review and innovate over the coming years.

If you're interested in the work we've done at Royal Holloway library on developing our High Use collection, please don't hesitate to contact us.

These views are the authors' own and do not necessarily reflect the views of UKSG.