

# The transformation of academic research: what librarians, faculty and students are saying

*UKSG eNews 446*

31 May 2019

**Brie Betz, ProQuest**

Ask anyone who has worked in academia for at least a few years, and they'll undoubtedly tell you how dramatically research has changed. There are a number of factors that have contributed to this – including technological advances, access to a growing wealth of information and content types, and changes to the way researchers consume information (now including channels such as blogs, podcasts and video).



At ProQuest, we naturally have a keen interest in these trends, since our mission is to help faculty, students and researchers improve outcomes through access to information. So, over the past two years, we conducted several studies to better understand how our users access information – and how they *prefer* to access information.

In combination with analysing usage data from the ProQuest platform and secondary research, we polled thousands of librarians and end-users with the intent of answering questions like:

*What's the scope of transformation in research?*

*How do these changes affect students, faculty and librarians in different ways?*

And, perhaps most important to us at ProQuest:

*What challenges and opportunities does this present for academic libraries?*

## Two surveys, two perspectives

In March 2019, we partnered with US trade publication *Library Journal* to survey more than 600 academic librarians – gathering their perspectives on the information needs and challenges facing researchers. Of these respondents, 38% said they make the final decision on which databases to purchase, while 51% said they contribute to database-purchasing decisions.

A few highlights from the results (you can [see the full study here](#)):

- research must go beyond the traditional scholarly journal, and different assignments require different content formats
- 94% of librarians think students should seek a variety of viewpoints to build critical thinking skills

- students should seek a variety of viewpoints – but struggle with which ones to trust
- unifying access to content simplifies the administration of library resources
- multi-disciplinary and multi-format databases help users discover and use the most relevant and reliable content

But how do users' perspectives differ from the perspectives of librarians? One year earlier, in March 2018, ProQuest surveyed a global selection of 1,300 faculty and students – including tenured professors, pre-tenured faculty and students – to understand the reasons why they recommend and use certain content types.

Respondents came from a broad range of disciplines, including social sciences, humanities and science and technology. Some self-reported as researching in multiple disciplines.

Some trends of note (you can [access the full study here](#)):

- faculty say that a mix of content aids students' understanding of a subject, contributes to better quality assignments and grades, and allows for a more thorough review of existing literature and research findings
- faculty encourage students to use primary sources – they believe these sources help students develop critical thinking and other key skills
- students are influenced by their professors' recommendations when choosing content to use in their research and assignments
- faculty see a crucial role for libraries in developing undergraduates' research, critical analysis and information literacy skills

Further, we learned that there are only subtle differences in the content types lecturers recommend and the content types students reportedly use.

**Lecturers recommend:  
(ranked in order of frequency)**

1. Scholarly journals
2. Print books
3. E-books
4. Dissertations and theses
5. Case studies
6. Government documents
7. Videos
8. Statistics
9. Historical books
10. Conference proceedings

**Students use:  
(ranked in order of frequency)**

1. E-books
2. Scholarly journals
3. Print books
4. Dissertations and theses
5. Case studies
6. Statistics
7. Government documents
8. Working papers
9. Current news and newspapers
10. Conference proceedings

The value of case studies is something that often comes through in our conversations with both lecturers and students, so it was no surprise to see it very well recommended and very well used. And while video is well recommended by lecturers but had less reported use by students, we suspect this could be because students may not see watching videos as 'research'.

**What does it all mean?**

Based on the data we've analysed, we've come to several relevant conclusions.

First, while peer-reviewed journals continue to be an essential resource for research and teaching, the mix of content being used by faculty and students is expanding, encompassing a broad variety

of sources. This trend has been well documented through our 2018 and 2019 studies, as well as other research. Librarians and lecturers both see major benefits for students in using multiple content types in their research and studies.

And finally, academic libraries are acknowledging that they need to change their collection strategies to account for this. The demand for more content requires commitment from the entire information community – not only libraries, but also publishers and aggregators.

By working together, we can ensure libraries are the source students and faculty have access to not only the content variety they require for research, teaching and learning, but also the most authoritative, reliable sources available for accessing that content.

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



This UKSG Editorial is taken from the industry newsletter *UKSG eNews*, published every two weeks exclusively for UKSG members. The newsletter provides up-to-the-minute news of current issues and developments within the global knowledge community.

To enjoy *UKSG eNews* and other member benefits [become a UKSG member](#).