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Research on the Research Support Needs of Social Scientists

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Abstract:

A new Centre for the Advanced Study of Social Sciences Library will be opened October 2004 in Oxford, England. It will amalgamate the collections of six social science departments and selected social science collections from the Bodleian Library. This event has provided the impetus for a study of the research support needs of Oxford University's social scientists. The study consisted of three one-hour focus group sessions with academics, followed by a web-based survey emailed to members of the Sociology, Politics and International Relations, Economics, Social Policy and Social Work, Criminology, and Socio-Legal Studies departments. The results of the study will be used to determine how much space should be allocated to print publications (which formats, which years) and to inform librarians about the types of services that might be introduced in a new library to support social scientists.

Introduction: In the Autumn of 2004, a new Centre for Advanced Study in the Social Sciences will open in Oxford, England. It will house six departments – criminology, economics, politics & international relations, social policy & social work, socio-legal studies and sociology on its upper floors with a library on the ground floor. Immediately next door, is the Law department with its extensive library¹.

¹ The Social Science Division also includes Business & Management, Economic Development, Educational Studies, Oxford Internet Institute and Refugee Studies. These departments and libraries will not be moving to this new Centre.

The new library will be an amalgamation of seven separate collections : those of the six departmental libraries as well as selected social science material from the Bodleian Library (a legal deposit library holding over 10 million items). This is a fantastic opportunity to provide new services, to design study and research facilities that will meet the needs of future social scientists and to decide which collections we should move into this new building. To do this we needed to know more about how researchers use information. We looked at various studies that had been conducted on the research methods and information needs of social scientists.

The most famous study of social scientists' information needs took place in the 1970s and is referred to as Project INFROSS (Information Requirements of the Social Sciences). It aimed to discover how social scientists used information. The results of this study were supplemented by a research project entitled DISISS (Design of Information Systems in the Social Sciences) which examined the size and structure of the literature of the social sciences. In the 1980s studies were undertaken in the Brazil (1987) and Netherlands (1989) based on the INFROSS methodology.

Maurice Line, in his article "Social Science information – the poor relation" (INSPEL, 33 (1993) 3, pp. 131-136), notes that a "large body of research carried out 25 years ago (i.e. INFROSS and DISISS) shed much light on the information needs and uses of social scientists and indicated means of improvement, but led to no action. In an information world radically changed by the Internet, we need to carry out new studies into information uses and needs." We took this point to heart and agreed that we need to know how information uses and the social scientists' perceptions of their needs have changed. We also agreed that it was more appropriate to use "methodologies like focus groups...(and) questionnaires" in undertaking a study on this topic.

There have been many other studies on research methods and information needs but unfortunately the majority of studies have been based on the natural sciences rather than the social sciences. The social sciences sit midway between the natural sciences and the humanities, but can these studies really provide us with clues on how social scientists might use e-prints, e-journals and monographs in the future? The disciplines in the social sciences are so varied that it would be dangerous to make such assumptions.

Some recent studies have included the social sciences or have concentrated on a format used primarily by social scientists. For example,

- *Reading Behaviour and Electronic Journals* by Carol Tenopir and Donald W. King presents the findings of several surveys, conducted between 2000 and 2001, which looked at researchers' journal reading habits. Results (which included social scientists) showed that only 8% knew about e-print services, only 8% read articles from e-journals subscribed to by the library, while 41% read articles from personal print subscriptions and 24% from library print subscriptions. An obvious conclusion is that print copies of journals are still used by researchers. (From: *Learned Publishing*, 15 (October 2002))
- The University of California, as part of their Collection Management Initiative, began collecting data on the use of electronic journals. Even in the early stages of the study, results showed a clear preference, regardless of discipline, for electronic versions. In the social sciences, the ratio of electronic to print use appeared to be 20:1. More detail can be seen at:
<http://www.lib.uci.edu/libraries/projects/cmi/cmiproject.html>

- Kirsti Nilsen's *IASSIST Quarterly* article on "Supermarket : Where do Social Scientists shop?" concentrates on the use of statistical information by social scientists. The results, sub-divided by discipline are extremely useful. Results detail typology of use, formats in which statistics are normally obtained and preferences for acquiring statistics.

Why have our own 'information needs and uses study'? Information needs and uses studies were popular in the 1960s and early 1970s but fell into decline shortly thereafter, largely because they were considered too ambitious, too contradictory in their findings, and of little practical use. Studying use in relation to need, though, remains one of the few ways we have of giving proper context to the materials and services we endeavor to provide to researchers. As long as we avoided some of the more obvious pitfalls of the past, we hoped for a practical and informative set of results from a study that endeavored to remain modest in its aims and mindful of the variances and contradictions in social science information need and use we were likely to uncover. The Oxford University Library Services is in need of evidence, both qualitative and quantitative, about the uses of and need for different types of materials in the University's key disciplines. For the design of the new library we needed answers to some very practical questions, such as :

- How many years of a print journal should be transferred to the new library, e.g. 10 years or 50 years of back-issues? Will this vary by social science discipline and field?
- What is the future of e-prints and discussion & working papers? Does it vary by discipline? How much space do we need to allocate for this type of material?
- It is easiest and cheapest to transfer serials from one Oxford library to another but would it be acceptable to transfer more journals than monographs to the new building? Would this vary by discipline or field?
- What services might be introduced in the new library, e.g. Inter-library lending and automated stack requests?
- Staff – What is the balance between the need for an IT Officer on site, a Data Librarian, an online help desk and/or a research enquiry point?

Mark Janes, the Oxford University Social Science Subject Consultant, designed the study and will produce the final report for publication later this year. He explains the **purpose and style of the Oxford study**.

- The possession of a clear set of aims and objectives for any study of information needs and uses in a discipline is essential. In particular, it is important know exactly what questions the information obtained will answer and what practical affect the findings will have upon information provision and services.
- In our case, we did have a well-defined practical purpose in that we are outlining the collections and services of a new library devoted to the social sciences. Making this clear to the academics taking part proved to be of substantial assistance in securing their participation.
- One of the main investigative aims of the study was to determine the context of information need and use. It was therefore important to also make sure that this study was billed primarily as a study of researchers and their information needs, not a library study. Discovering that researchers often retrieve and exchange information without the aid of a library is a good thing to do!
- We decided that a dual approach of focus group sessions and a division-wide survey was the most appropriate. This would give us the depth of response from researchers encouraged to talk about their information needs and uses combined with the quantitative data of the survey method.

- It is important to map out the various types of information that researchers may use beforehand. Previous studies and a knowledge of the disciplines is particularly helpful here.
- The discovery of variances across the fields of social science research should be both expected and encouraged. We understood early on in the investigation that there was little point in trying to force consistent patterns of need and use on researcher's information habits.

Why focus groups?

- Although the librarians maintain good contacts and relations with the academic staff such encounters are largely restricted to formal meetings, specific queries, or in helping with the teaching programmes of departments. Using such contacts as 'evidence' of general information need and use in a discipline would be both anecdotal and speculative.
- Focus group sessions encourage participants to discuss and think about daily routines and habits that they would tend to perform without too much self-analysis. In the case of academic researchers, such sessions can encourage researchers to examine why they choose a particular information source or information seeking method over others.
- The context of information need and use in academic research is all important. Despite the fact that a group of researchers may work in the same institution and draw upon the resources of that institution marked differences can still be discerned in the material they read and how they go about obtaining it. The depth of experience identified by the focus group approach enables the investigator to locate the source of these differences in the fields of research and working methods of the participants.
- Focus group sessions, particularly with social scientists, can be both rewarding and enjoyable and therefore a good PR exercise for the library as researchers appreciate the considered approach of information professions attempting to discover the information needs of their community.

Focus group pointers:

- In order for researchers to give up the valuable time required to participate in focus group sessions they must fully appreciate the purpose and necessity of such an exercise as a benefit both to the library and to their own work.
- The investigator needs to be both skilled and confident in talking to accomplished academics, especially those in the social sciences who may be highly skilled in running such sessions themselves.
- The questioning has to be pertinent. For our study we chose to focus on how researchers work and what materials they need for their work. Running focus group sessions therefore requires preparation and background research, both into the nature of the discipline researchers are working in and their own research interests, thereby ensuring that the questions are meaningful and pertinent to the individuals concerned.
- Overcoming the misconception that participants are going to be asked questions about how libraries and services should be run rather than their own working habits was important from the outset. This was achieved by focusing immediately on reading and working habits and asking very little about libraries as such. The location chosen for the focus group session can also help. In our case we chose to run such sessions in the departments rather than the library.
- Taking meaningful and perceptive notes of the discussion as it unfolds is essential. Half remembered phrases or discussions are no substitute for good written notes when conducting the analysis of sessions. It is advisable to tape the sessions (as long as this does not deter the participants from speaking their minds), although the transcription and analysis of recorded sessions alone is extremely time consuming.

- Focus group sessions alone may not be enough for an institutional wide study. Consisting typically of a very small selection of the community, the sessions provide depth but not the quantitative breadth of the survey approach.

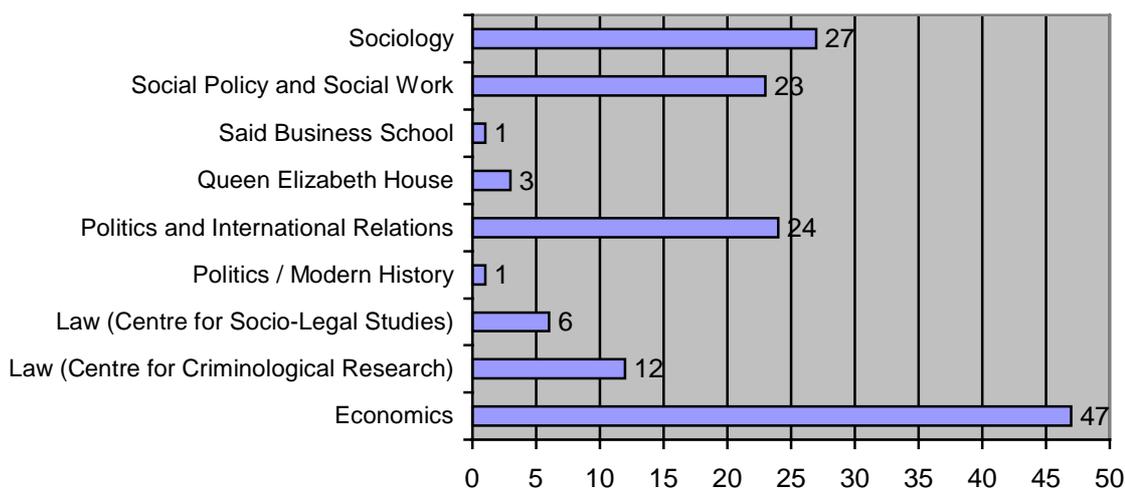
The survey.

- The questions asked by the survey related directly to the focus group sessions in that they followed the pattern of dividing up questions by format (journals, informal publications, data etc.) or by activity (such as information seeking or library use) and provided a quantitative overview of the issues already highlighted by the sessions. This insured that the handful of researchers participating in the focus group sessions did not 'speak for' the entire community when it came to making crucial decisions about the collections and services provided by the new library.

Survey pointers:

- A Web-based survey form was selected as the best method of dissemination. The form was simple in design (so as not to put off potential respondents) and took little more than 5 minutes to complete. Accessibility was considered essential in securing a good response.
- The survey was disseminated via the departmental mailing list managed by the departments. We had support from all the Heads of Department. In the two cases where the survey was sent out in their name, the response rate was higher than when it was sent out by the Librarian. This gave us a potential constituency of approximately 267 academic researchers of which 144 (54% responded). 76% of economists and 60% of sociologists represented the highest response rates, followed by 55% of Social Policy and Social Work, 55% of Socio-Legal, 48% of Criminology, and 26% of Politics and International Relations. The Politics and International Relations Department's response rate was so low that paper copies were provided in the departmental office. Unfortunately, this didn't result in many more responses.

Fig. 1 Number of Responses by Department



These questions were followed by Oxford specific questions on which libraries were used by academics. (see Survey, p. 11-16)

The following section of this paper consists of three example results from the survey, the context of the questions asked, and how the results are going to be used to formulate collection policies for the new library.

Example 1: Use of the journal literature by department.

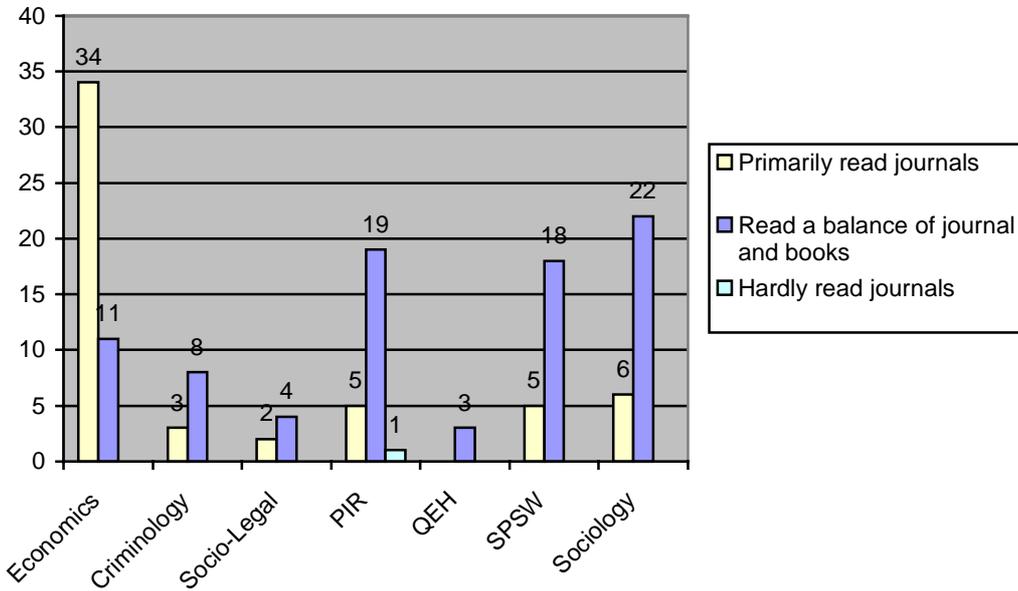
We are all aware that **journals** are used heavily by the majority of social scientists. Even when publishing delays and a strong pre-publication culture means that pre-prints, working papers and discussion papers have become a prominent feature of the communication structure of a discipline (as is the case with Economics) it is evident that formally published articles are still being read by researchers.

From the round of focus group sessions we learnt that journals and the associated system of peer review were still regarded as a cornerstone in maintaining the standards of disciplines. A well known hierarchy of journal titles was acknowledged to exist in the targeted disciplines and researchers accepted that publishing an article in a more prestigious journal was likely to influence the acceptance and visibility of research findings. Many of the focus group participants edited or peer reviewed articles for journals.

In terms of usage, journals also play a practical role in keeping up with developments (“where the discipline is going can be seen in conferences and the most recent issues of journals”), as well as remaining the most convenient method of identifying additional reading material and findings. Researchers tend to read a core selection of journals on a regular basis (every day in some cases), extending this to identifying and reading articles from other journals at critical junctures in the research process. Focus group participants and survey respondents also reported reliance upon a variety of automated methods of identifying and keeping up with the journal literature.

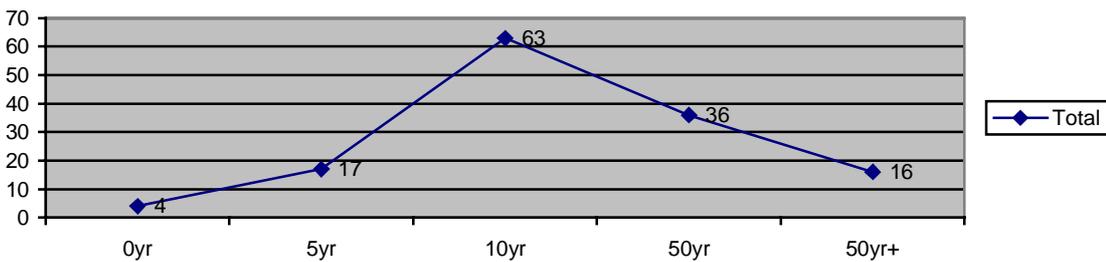
In the survey, only 1 respondent reported that they “hardly ever read journal articles”, whilst 39% regarded journals as the “primary source of information” in their field, with a further 60% reporting that they read a balance of journal and other material.

Fig.2. Journal use by department



The departmental analysis revealed that economists were far more likely than any other discipline to regard journals as their primary source of information, a figure of 76% also being the only result from a discipline that was greater than those reading a balance of monograph and journal material. A figure of 21% primarily reading journals appeared typical for Sociology, Politics and International Relations, and Social Policy and Social Work indicating that, for these disciplines, we would need to maintain a strong monograph collection for frontline needs.

Fig. 3. Journal age (totals)



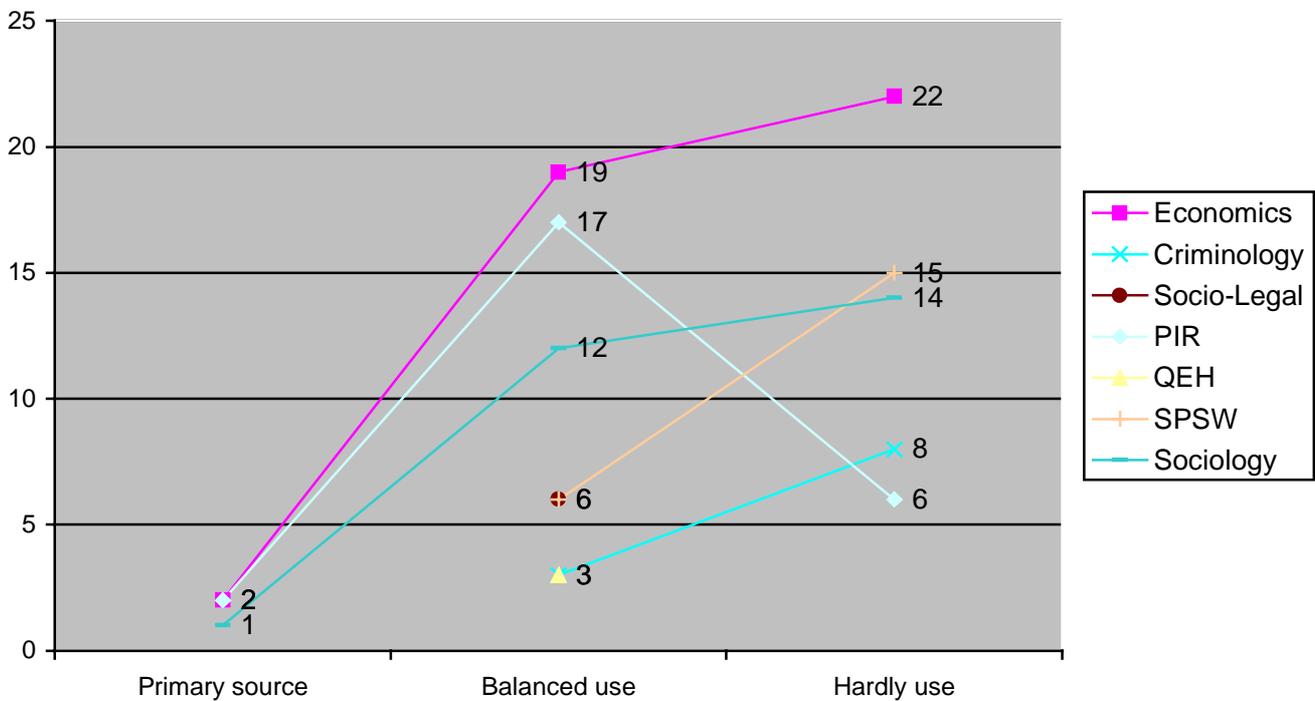
In asking respondents about the **age of the journal** articles they would typically read we had a further indication of the relative redundancy of research information over time and, in thinking about that in conjunction with increased e-journal use (79% of respondents regularly access journals in electronic form) we now have a set of predictors of frontline research journal needs for the new library.

Example 2: Use of monographs by social scientists

Unlike the natural sciences, the **monograph** (a substantial scholarly work published in book form) still maintains a primary role in the dissemination of research findings for many fields and retains a great deal of status for many social scientists. Nevertheless, its precise role varies substantially from discipline to discipline.

For example, although in Economics it is still regarded as important for major research projects to produce such material, the economists themselves were far less inclined than in other disciplines to read monograph material. In sociology, on the other hand, monographs are often regarded as significant staging posts in the development of a field of knowledge, summarising in an authoritative manner the state of development. Whilst, in both politics and international relations the monograph can still be the primary mechanism for the dissemination of research findings

Fig. 9. Monograph use by department



Of the 137 who answered the survey question on monograph use, though, only 5 reported that they regarded this material to be their sole source of information on research findings in their field. Some 73% of criminologists, 71% of researchers in Social Policy and Social Work, and 51% of economists hardly read monographs at all. In contrast, 76% of researchers in Politics and International Relations do read monograph material on a regular basis, although only 8% regarded this as their primary source of research information.

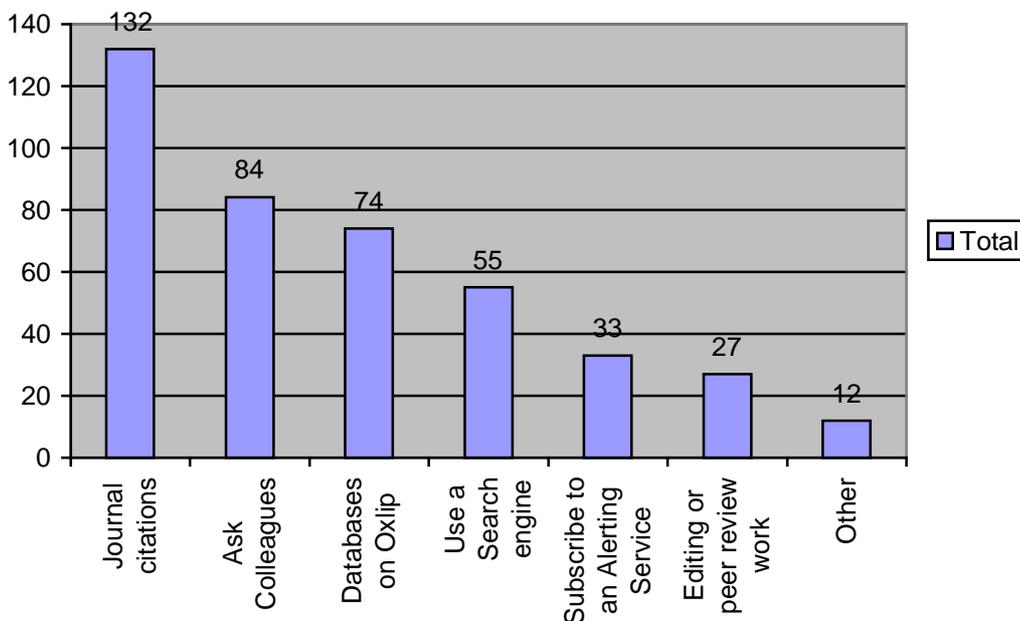
The indications, then, are that a library dealing with the frontline, immediate needs of social science researchers will need to be both flexible and differentiated in its treatment of monograph collection development. Over and above the needs of taught course students, we need to examine in greater depth the fields and working styles of researchers in which monograph use becomes essential.

Example 3: Information seeking

How might asking researchers about their information seeking habits help us to greater understand and develop the provision of services in a social science library? Perhaps the most obvious way is in our assessment of the use, effectiveness, and value of bibliographic databases and other finding aids that we provide to researchers. Beyond this, though, we need to be aware of the context in which the use of these resources occurs and the fact that, despite the costs and the training we endeavor to provide, sometimes researchers simply need to deploy their own more convenient or effective methods of retrieving information.

In order to address these issues researchers were asked in the focus group sessions and in the survey **how they traced journal articles** relevant to their work. The intention, in part, of this question was to place social scientists' use of bibliographic databases and other resources paid for by the library within the context of overall information seeking and exchange in a discipline.

How social scientists trace journal articles



As expected, the use of citations in articles read was the most popular method of tracing further articles relevant to one's work. Of the 144 that responded to this question (more than one option could be selected) 92% used this method of information seeking. In addition, 58% would ask their colleagues to recommend or inform them of relevant articles, whilst 19% would also pick up useful references through their roles as editors and peer reviewers.

Automated methods are also popular, with just over half (51%) using databases available via OxLIP (an Oxford designed reader interface giving access to the hundreds of databases and thousands of e-journals we subscribe to as an institution), 38% making use of search engines (e.g. Google), and 23% subscribing to a journal alerting service.

Other methods included attendance at and/or records of conferences, browsing or searching through journals on TDNet (software that provides access to all the e-journals subscribed to by Oxford University) and

JSTOR (an electronic archive of core journals which can be purchased by Universities), and other resources or Web sites not listed on OxLIP

Fig. 18. Information seeking methods by department

	Eco	Crim	Socio-Legal	Pol/ M Hist	PIR	QEH	SBS	SPSW	Soc	Grand Total
Journal citations	44	10	5	1	23	3	1	21	24	132
Colleag.	26	9	5	1	16	2	1	13	11	84
Oxlip	23	7	3		10	3	1	8	19	74
Use a Search engine	19	7	2		8	1	1	7	10	55
Alerting Service	13	5	2		4		1	4	4	33
Editing or peer review	14	2	2	1	4		1	1	2	27
Other	2	1			2		1	1	5	12

Researchers in Social Policy and Social Work were marginally more likely to use citations in journals than other departments (38% of responses), whilst researchers in socio-legal studies appear most likely to consult with colleagues (26% of responses) followed by political scientists (23%).

The Social Studies Libraries have been active in providing online resource training sessions to academics but these are not well attended. However, those who do attend find the sessions very useful in introducing them to online resources they did not know about previously. The library has recently created an “online resource update” newsletter to further promote the many online databases we subscribe to in the University.

Conclusion: In my talk at Berlin, the conclusion will include answers to many of the questions posed at the beginning of the paper. These were not included here because the final results of the study will not be available until July 2003.

- How many years of a print journal should be transferred to the new library, e.g. 10 years or 50 years of back-issues? Will this vary by social science discipline and field?
- What is the future of e-prints and discussion & working papers? Does it vary by discipline? How much space do we need to allocate for this type of material or should we install more computers and printers?
- It is easiest and cheapest to transfer serials from one Oxford library to another but would it be acceptable to transfer more journals than monographs to the new building? Would this vary by discipline or field?
- What services might be introduced in the new library, e.g. Inter-library lending and automated stack requests?
- Staff – What is the balance between the need for an IT Officer on site, a Data Librarian, an online help desk and/or a research enquiry point?

The Survey consisted of the following questions:

Your name:

Your Department

Your College:

Please list your main research interests:

JOURNALS

Please select the sentence that best describes your use of journals:

Journal articles are the primary source of information in my field.

I read a balance of journal and book material.

I hardly ever read journal articles.

What is the age of the journals you use?

Current articles only Up to 5 years old Up to 10 years old Up to 50 years old

From current to more than 50 years old

Do you access journals online?

YES NO

If yes, please select the sentence which best describes your use of electronic journals:

I use electronic journals all the time and hardly ever go to the library now.

I read a balance of electronic and print journals.

There are only a few electronic journals in my field, so I mainly read print journals.

Other (please describe)

How do you trace journal articles relevant to your work? (You may select more than one response)

I use the references in articles and books

Colleagues

Subscription to an alerting service

Through my work as an editor or peer reviewer

By using Google or other Internet search engine.

Through databases available on OxLip

(please specify)

Other (please describe)

INFORMAL PUBLICATIONS

Do you read non-peer reviewed material such as working papers, discussion papers, or pre-prints in your field?

YES

NO

If yes, please select the sentence which best describes your use of this material:

I read this material and hardly ever read the published journal article.

I read this material regularly but will still read the published article.

I read this material but not often.

Other (please describe)

MONOGRAPHS

Please select the best description of your use of monographs:

I mainly read monograph material in preference to other material.

I read a balance of monograph and other material.

I only read monographs occasionally

I hardly ever read monographs.

Other (please describe)

FOREIGN LANGUAGE PUBLICATIONS

Do you regularly read publications written in a language other than English?

YES

NO

If yes, please specify which languages

OFFICIAL PAPERS

Do you use reports and papers from governmental or other official organisations?

YES

NO

If yes, how do you obtain these publications? (You may select more than one option).

I/we receive our own printed copy

I access them online.

I use a library (please specify)

DATA AND STATISTICAL SOURCES

Do you use data and/or other published statistical sources in your work?

YES NO

If yes, which one of these sentences best describes your use of these sources:

I tend to use only 'raw' datasets

I use a mixture of raw data and published statistics

I tend to use only published statistics

Other (please describe)

How do you access this material? (You may select more than one option).

Nuffield server

Departmental server

By scanning data from printed sources

Hand copying of printed data

I ask the Data Librarian

I download files from an online archive (for example Essex)

Directly from author of the dataset

Other (please specify)